

Baksa

AND OTHER SHORT STORIES

Translated from the Urdu original
by several Hands



ZAKIA MASHHADI

Radon Pradan

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NATIONAL BOOK TRUST, INDIA

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FOREWORD

Zakia Mashhadi is a remarkable writer – remarkable for the range of her interests, the tensile strength and beauty of her words and the complete absence of rhetorical flourishes in her crisp, compact prose. I met her some years ago at her home in Patna for the first time, and was impressed by her warmth and empathy, not to mention generous hospitality. She served me a sumptuous tea in her balcony overlooking the vast expanse of the mighty Ganga river that, literally, flows past her doorstep. In the course of reading her over the years, I found the same qualities I had noticed in that first meeting echoed in her writing: namely empathy and good-natured warmth. Today, having read most, if not all, of her work, and having translated one of her stories, I do believe she is one of the finest voices we have in contemporary Urdu fiction.

Zakia apa, as I have taken to calling her in the last decade or so that I have known her, is somewhat of a late-bloomer as a writer. Wrapped in the constraints of domesticity for far too long, she is now, well into her seventies, and is finding her true voice and writing robust stories on a host of issues – communalism, sectarianism, religious identity, the pulls and pressures of city life, sharp rural poverty and deprivation that city folk cannot even imagine, the rural-urban divide and yes, gender. She seems especially interested in lives that are marginalized, disenfranchised and disinvested of everything; in their nakedness and abjectness she seeks and finds kernels

of humanity. With these she paints glowing cameos such as the stoic Ram Dhani's Mother and the selfless, loving Badi Amma. Everywhere, in each of these tautly constructed stories, Zakia apa's advanced degree on Psychology, and her stint as a teacher of Psychology, explains her interest and understanding of the human mind. Never judgmental or condemnatory of human failings, she seems to view her task as a writer to lay bare her character and leave it to the reader to draw what they wish.

Often the translator of her own stories, in 'Man' (Aadmi) she weaves a densely lush tapestry alive with the sound and colour of rural India: a hamlet in the Himalayan foothills is plagued by animal attacks: serpents, leopards, elephants and finally the most bestial of all, Man. Leaving a great deal unsaid, Zakia apa nonetheless tells a heart-wrenching story of the bestiality men unleash on little girls. Some of these horrific stories make it to the national headlines, such as the Kathua rape case; but so many go unreported.

The nameless, faceless migrants, who come from remote rural areas to big cities in search of a living, appear in two of her stories included here: an impoverished, emaciated family that comes to Patna to find food, clothes and shelter but loses a son to the mighty river in 'Har Har Gange' and the little girl employed as a maid in the heart-breaking story 'Doll'. Leaving her kuchha home in some remote hamlet, boarding a train for the very first time, a young girl who remains nameless throughout the story, is employed by a couple to look after their small children and do various errands around the home. While reasonably well-fed and looked after by her kindly employers, a nameless desire to return to her roots overwhelms her; she runs away with the two most 'valuable' things in her employers' home: not cash or jewellery, but a doll that has long fascinated her and a big book full of colourful illustrations.

Another remarkable story is 'The Wolves are Secular' (Bhediye Secular Hain). Here Zakia apa takes us further into rural India, in fact, deep into its forested heart, with this story about wolf sightings and mysterious child abductions. A hungry wolf is on the prowl and small children are routinely being mauled and killed but rumour has it that it is showing a preference for victims from only one community. Angry murmurs begin to do the rounds of the village: "This place is not a hideout for wolves ... The wolves never came back after 1947-48." Snide murmurs give way to rumblings of righteous indignation: "We must respond with similar aggression – a tooth for a tooth, an eye for an eye. This is a grave failing on our part, that we Hindus suffer injustice and violence ever so submissively – as though we were drinking mouthfuls of nectar – without so much as hesitating to heave a sigh." Tensions escalate amidst talks of secret agents from a neighbouring country being behind the dastardly acts when Muslim women and children too are attacked and this time in broad daylight and a wolf is clearly seen. In order to establish its secular credentials, the wolf must attack and kill victims from both communities! And the story, called appropriately enough 'The Wolves are Secular' concludes thus: "In fact, not just that one – all wolves are secular. They do not kill on account of religious convictions."

Partition cast a long shadow over the Indian sub-continent and the violence that unspooled from it scarred the jubilations of independence; the memory of this violence has never really faded. It finds expression each time there is a communal riot in India or whenever pluralism, multiculturalism and secularism come under the onslaught of majoritarian forces. The memory of that violence finds expression in 'The Echo of Days Past'. A riot in the city brings back painful memories. But this time those who had steadfastly refused to leave their homes in the past, pull up their roots and move: they don't have a new country to go to this time round so they move to a new neighbourhood, a

ghetto, no more than a slum, where others of their community huddle together.

The women in Zakia Mashhadi's stories deserve a special mention. Be it Munni, who lives on river island and sells fish to earn a meagre living or the bossy Naiyara Beg or the incandescent Raushan Ara. Zakia's apa's women are warm, real and strongly etched. Here, for instance is a description of Munni: "A youthful body of twenty-eight, robust from hard work, taut like a stretched bow and glowing like the flame of a lamp." That she is poor beyond belief, and living, as she does, a hand-to-mouth existence, pales into insignificance when she is described thus, for she is rich in her humanity and her womanliness. And here is how the much-married Janaki Raman Pandey describes Raushan Ara with whom he falls heedlessly in love: "And I haven't loved you just for your looks either. It is also because of your intelligence, your wit, your deep understanding, and your innate nobility." Zakia apa's women are not flat cardboard characters; they are well-rounded, rooted in reality and immensely relatable.

Also noteworthy is her depiction of a ganga-jamuni tehzeeb, a mili-juli-sanskriti evocative of the centuries-old friendships between Hindus and Muslims living side by side in the towns and hamlets that form the backdrop of her stories. Clearly, Zakia apa has been noting and observing people of different faiths, socio-economic backgrounds and diverse cultural traditions. When she sits down to tell her stories, this distilled sociological insight seeps into her writing. There can be no better example of Zakia apa's understanding of religion and empathy for religious differences than the sprawling story told in 'The Saga of Janki Raman Pandey'. Replete with musings on gunnah and sawwab, long, leisurely asides on life and death as well as what is halal or haraam, the story is a masterful meditation on life in a multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-ethnic society such as ours.

This collection of thirteen stories, some translated by Zakia apa herself and some by others, is an important work. It needs to be read with seriousness and purpose and, will, I am sure garner interest from a variety of readers: those interested in contemporary Urdu literature, students of gender studies, as well as those looking at literature from the margins in translation.

NEW DELHI

DR. RAKHSHANDA JALIL

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Tardiness, an integral part of my nature, became stronger as physical capacities fell prey to the advancing years. If some friends had not kept nudging me on, and later, offering help with editing, this English rendition of my Urdu stories would not have seen the light of the day.

First of all, I express my gratitude to Ms. Rhakhshanda Jalil, a critic, translator and literary historian of repute, for sparing time from her formidably busy schedule to write the foreword for this collection. She had been reading my stories in Urdu for quite some time and had, at the behest of Sahitya Akademi, even translated one (The Doll); yet she went through the entire English version of those which are selected, and wrote the foreword, I must say, from the heart as well as the mind.

I am fortunate to have Ms. Subashree Krishnaswamy as a close friend, who deserves deepest thanks from my heart. She is an editor, translator, writer and an adjunct professor at the Asian College of Journalism, Chennai and has won Sahitya Akademi award for translating a hefty collection of Tamil short stories into English. She very kindly offered to edit my humble efforts and edited a couple of stories, though I declined her generous offer of doing the entire lot for fear of encroaching upon her precious time. Her qualifications and achievements are certainly enviable.

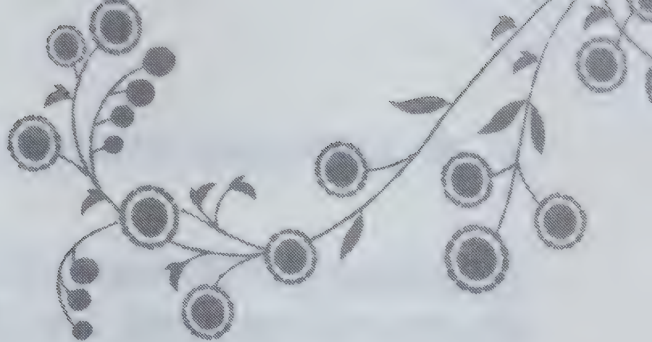
Mrs. Mukta Prahlad (nee Bhatnagar), a close friend of long standing from our young, happy times in Lucknow , also

helped with her valuable suggestions and editing. Mukta, with her Masters in English from the University of Lucknow, first taught at Loreto convent college, Lucknow, and then shifted to Institute of English and Foreign Languages, Hyderabad, from where she retired as the professor of English. Though we have not met for ages our bonding remains the same. A big ‘Thank You’ to her, too.

Three of the stories included in this collection were translated at Wisconsin University, Madison, U.S and published in their journal, Words without Borders. They are: ‘Long live the Ganges’, ‘Mother’ and ‘Saga of Janki Raman Pandey’. I am very sorry to say that the two gentlemen, who selected and translated these stories, are no more. One is Mr. Faruq Hasan who translated Long live... at the behest of Mr. Mohammad Umar Memon, who was then the professor emeritus of Urdu literature and Islamic studies at the University of Wisconsin.

My special gratitude goes to Mr. Memon, who not only translated the long short story, ‘Saga of Janki Raman Pandey’ and ‘Mother’ but also included the former in his last work, which is an anthology of Urdu stories titled, “The Greatest Urdu Stories Ever Told.”

Finally, I would like to thank NBT with a special note of the editor of the English wing for publishing the translated stories to carry them to a wider readership. I cherish my long association with NBT and gratefully acknowledge their contributions for having published some of the stories in various Urdu anthologies.



1

Mother



A blast of cold wind tore through her bones. It was bitterly cold. As if that wasn't enough, the slow winter rains had also started. Wrapping her thin sari tightly around her shoulders, Munni thought about the four chickens crouching under the wicker basket. They must be getting soaked by the drizzle coming in through the wickerwork. If they fell ill and died, it would be impossible to buy new ones to replace them.

With shivering hands she removed the thatched frame that served as the door and came out. The rain had, as it were, enveloped everything in a veil of thin muslin. The sun hadn't shown for quite a few days now. And on top of that, this sheet of rain! Then she suddenly realized her foolishness. Even ordinarily it was hard for her to keep track of days and months and dates. Now she even seemed to be forgetting mornings and evenings. She sighed wearily. The sun would have gone down anyway by now, even if it had been out today. It was night already; except that, yes, it wouldn't have been quite as sad and dark at the very first watch as it seemed. She lifted the cover of the basket and grabbed the chickens. The frightened birds didn't raise any cry of protest. Gathering all four with her arm and holding the cover of the basket in her armpit, she was about to turn back when she suddenly noticed a formless shape emerging from the darkness and drizzle. There was a sudden flash of light at the same time. For a moment she thought: Must be the fire-demon. But the demon, if Hindu, should be in the cremation

grounds, and if Muslim, in the graveyard going around rolling its eyes making people lose their way. What has he got to do with the abode of the living! Here, as it is, they have plenty of demons of their own. Munni didn't feel afraid. She generally wouldn't be scared anyway. In the still of the night, she was living a lonely life on a piece of protruding land in the middle of the swirling Ganges. Other people lived there as well, but their huts were all far apart.

In between, there were farmlands, or wide, spread-out patches to grow vegetables. When evening fell, jackals howled and foxes making surreptitious noises lay in wait at the door for the chickens. Sometimes, a slithering green snake hung down like a rope from the guava tree in the courtyard. It would lift its neck and stare at Munni with its small, shiny, venomous, eyes. It never managed to scare her. She would pick up a small stick nearby and threaten it, "What are you going to take away now, eh? Do you have even more poison in you than Hersia?" In her view, her eight-year-old, polio-stricken son, and her two five-year-old, half-dead twin girls, couldn't be of any use to the snake. Gathering her three children like little chicks under her feathers, she would run around contentedly foraging for sustenance for them and herself.

At 4:00 in the morning, when the sun wasn't even up yet, when in the murky darkness of the receding summer night, or wrapped in a thick sheet of winter fog the Ganges still slept, the fishermen would draw their nets from the river and their boats would fill with wriggling, writhing fish. Then, with all the others, Munni would arrive with her basket. She would fill it up, pay for her merchandise, and by eight o'clock be ready to catch the boat to go across the river. Carrying the basket on her head, going from house to house, she would sell the fish and be back by two or half past. Along the way she would pick up the stuff needed for her household. Once in a while, a fish or two would be left unsold. Without worrying

whether she could make any profit from it or not, she would often sell it to Hersia at a throwaway price. His wooden stall was located at the end of the wharf. He would flirt with her whenever she went by and offered her free tea, but never paid her the fair price for the fish she sold him. He knew that fish couldn't last very long, and a small businesswoman like Munni didn't have the capacity to bear much loss. That uneducated seller of fried and raw fish, plying his trade under the cover of his tea stall, was no less shrewd than the business executive of any multinational company.

By caste, Munni wasn't a fisherwoman, but having lived on this outcrop island for the past twelve or thirteen years and because of her husband's job of running the motorboat back and forth across the river, she was familiar only with the Ganges and the fish living in it. After getting married, she had come here in her fifteenth year. Even before that, she had carried a lot of love in her heart for Mother Ganges and felt very devoted to her. That she would get a chance to live on her banks, she hadn't even imagined. And now, Mother Ganges was the only means of subsistence for her. With difficulty she had saved up a little money and bought some chickens so she would be able to feed the eggs to her children. Her firstborn had died simply because he needed good food along with medication. Whenever she thought of him, a sharp pain shot through her. He was born within the first year of their marriage. What a great help he would have been if he were alive today, that eleven or twelve-year-old boy of hers!

The cold wind pierced her bones. She felt as if she was developing a fever, but then curiosity overcame the feeling of chill. Who was this coming her way taking long strides on this swooshing outcrop island, where the freezing winds blowing from the Ganges had made even the jackals forget their howling and hide in their dens?

She saw yet another flash of light. “Munni! O’ Munni?” the approaching light called her by name.

She was startled. She rushed outside, completely forgetting the cold, the basket cover under her arm, and the chickens she was holding. She was amazed to see him.

“You, Master? Here, at this time? Come inside, please. It’s very cold.” Around his tall, lean body he had, as usual, wrapped a dhoti, but instead of a thin shirt, this time he was wearing one fashioned from a coarse cotton cloth with full sleeves. On his head he had wrapped a thin cloth towel. This was his entire winter dress. (And many in the village did not even have that.)

“Need your permission to pass the night here under the overhang. Will leave in the morning.” He smiled, but his voice betrayed the sound of chattering teeth.

“Come inside, Master.”

“Inside?” he hesitated a little.

“Yes, Master. There’s too much wind out here.”

He followed her in, and Munni felt as if the angels had set foot in her house, or that Mother Ganges herself had assumed the shape of a human being and stepped into her hut. It was great fortune! She hurriedly put the cover of the basket in a corner and shoved the chickens under it. Then she began taking out some dry leaves and twigs of guava and some dung cakes from a sack.

“Don’t do anything special for me, Munni. I just needed a roof over my head for the night; couldn’t go on walking anymore.” Looking very tired, he took off the pouch hanging from his shoulder, put the flashlight in it and sat down with a thud, like a felled tree, right there on the dirt floor. She felt deeply moved. “Don’t say anything anymore. We can only give you what we have. Nothing more, nothing less.” She said it so simply that he was forced to be quiet. “Master, your clothes are all wet”, she said as she searched for something. She had

her back towards him. How could she have any clothes that he might change into, so he turned a deaf ear to her observation, even though there was little he could have considered heavenly at that moment besides dry clothes, a dry body, and a dry place protected from the wind. (Every person had his own concept of heaven, conditioned perhaps by its own time and place.)

“I have a dhoti saved from my husband” she said, sensing the drift of his silence.

“That’s fine. If my clothes dry by morning, I’ll leave it here”, he showed his willingness. That made Munni happy. She brought down a tin box from the cornice of the only room of her hut. Her husband had bought this from the Monday fair in Patna and had put a red, flowered sari in it. Munni didn’t wear that sari anymore. She kept it safe in this tin box along with his only dhoti. Now only the bride who had the courage to marry her lame son would wear it. She would really be the one deserving it.

Hurriedly, Munni took out the dhoti before he changed his mind, and handing it over to him, moved away. He put aside his wet clothes, tied half of the dhoti around his loins and wrapped the other half around his upper body. He must look like a Buddhist mendicant now. Thinking of that, a faint smile flashed across his lips.

The thick, coarse dhoti provided a lot of comfort. The joy of getting rid of the wet clothes and putting on dry ones was beyond words.

“May the good Lord be gracious to this kindhearted woman”, he wished her well in his heart.

His pouch had love and good wishes aplenty for everyone, but these did not fill their stomachs or help them get rid of sickness. Nor did they bring Munni’s husband back. The police had whisked him away after someone reported that he was involved in the smuggling of kattha from Nepal. Never mind his return. After five-and-a-half year no one knew where he was

or whether he was even alive. Could Munni ever forget how, for over a year, he (the man she called ‘Master’) had selflessly devoted his time to looking for her husband and getting him released? Finally, Munni had folded her own hands to him and said: “Lord, I have learned to be patient; Master, you too may let it go now. If I am destined to enjoy marital bliss, my husband will turn up on his own someday. If, on the other hand, the Almighty has washed away the vermillion of marital life from my forehead, then there is little anyone can do”. Her firstborn was sick even before her husband’s imprisonment and the misfortunes which followed his arrest exacerbated the boy’s illness. At that time Munni did not know the man she called Master too well, but one day he came to the door. Somebody had told him there was a sick child in that hut. Seeing the child, he became rather concerned. It was necessary to take him to the doctor, but the doctor would not be available until Wednesday. It was a Friday. The child needed not just medication but also good food. Simple medication wouldn’t help, the man thought with regret. Holding the listless child in her lap, shedding tears, she had no means to provide enough food for even two times a day. She was carrying the twins, nearing the end of her term, and was herself in need of proper nutrition. But she was more concerned for her two older boys, especially the firstborn.

“Munni, I’ll come back on Wednesday” he said. “Your child needs to be taken to the hospital.” Then he took the pouch off from his shoulder – the same pouch that always hung there, as it did today.

“Keep these” he said, putting his hand inside the pouch and taking out four duck eggs and six bananas. Two different people in the village had given these gifts to him. He handed all of them to the child. Munni could never forget the joy that came into the child’s pale face and dulled eyes on seeing this windfall. Whenever the pain of the boy’s demise troubled her, she recalled this glow of joy that had comforted her grieving

heart like a gentle, cooling breeze. The child was very happy during the last two days of his life. He had left this world in a contented frame of mind. There was food in his stomach, and good food at that. On Wednesday, when the man came to take him to the hospital, the winds had already blown away his ashes and his small, frail, half-burned body had vanished into the waters of the Ganges. But Munni put her head on the man's feet. "He ate those eggs very eagerly. Even extended his hand to give a banana to the younger boy. That was all because of your generosity. If he had gone from this world hungry, we would have suffered the rest of our lives." Her tears soaked his feet, but her grip on them was so strong that, despite a million efforts to pull them away, she didn't let him go until she'd had her say.

That was when the man found out about her husband. He also heard from someone that due to some wrangling with Hersia, the latter had reported her husband to the police. Whether the report was true or false, it was hard to know. The smuggling of kattha and bidi leaves from Nepal was quite common. It was possible he just drove the motorboat and didn't know about the merchandise he was transporting or that he was implicated in smuggling. Anyway, whatever it was, he was a small fish swallowed up by big ones. The man she called Master wasn't successful in getting him out, but Munni was grateful that someone at least thought about him and did something. When her second son contracted polio, it was this man who took him to the hospital and had the surgery performed. The hospital fitted the child with a prosthetic shoe and brace that reached up to his knee. He still limped, but looked much better than before, when his gait had resembled some grotesque, hopping creature. Munni's heart sank every time she saw him. She often thought: if the good Lord had to take one of His sons, why didn't He take this broken and damaged one? The sound one disappeared, while this one is still around. But now, as a result of all the efforts of this man, her son was able to

handle his affairs easily and she was thinking of getting him an apprenticeship in some shop soon.

When the boy returned from the hospital, once again she had put her head on the man's feet. Idolatry and apostasy were not part of her vocabulary. Even if they were, their meanings were not part of her repertoire. The good Lord never came down Himself from the heavens. He always sent some human being to get things done, so whomever He sent was His avatar.

She lit a fire in the washbasin, lifted the basin, and carried it over to him. Then she poured two glasses of water into a large, crooked aluminum bowl to boil it with a piece of jaggery, some leaves of tulsi grown in her courtyard, and a few whole black peppercorns. When the water had come to a full boil, she poured this "tea" into two aluminum cups, and also sat down, holding her own cup. The aluminum bowl, scoured with the Ganges sand, glinted like silver in the light of the low flames.

The good Lord is a great helper: if Munni's hut were not on his way, the man would have frozen to death. For him at this moment, even a thatched straw roof would have been enough, but the jaggery, which gave strength to his empty stomach, the tulsi leaves which filled his cold body with warmth, and the sharpness of the black pepper....every sip of the tea was ambrosia.

"Go to sleep now, Munni. It's very late", he said gently.

"People talk a lot about you. There were times when I too longed to sit with you."

"I know. And I also know what they talk about", he smiled. "I'm tired of answering questions. Even then I run into someone who begins asking everything anew. Maybe you too want to know who I am, where I've come from, where my family is, how I manage my life, why I live here and so on...isn't that so?"

Artlessly, Munni nodded her head in agreement.

He laughed. "All right, you listen too. My parents are no longer living. They were still alive when I first arrived here. I

have brothers and sisters, friends and acquaintances, but I've left them all far away." He paused a little. There was a beloved as well, lamps of hope lit in her eyes, dreaming dreams of a future together. I turned her life upside down, left her behind too. This he did not tell Munni and picked up the story again.

"By turns, they all keep sending me money. That's more than enough for my needs. I even save some to help others. I never extend my hand to anyone, yet I never sleep on an empty stomach. If any of you ever wants to give me something, I never refuse it. Sometimes a cowherd will give me a pot of milk or a housewife will give me a kilo or half a kilo of some vegetable."

"But that you share with others?"

"Only what is in excess of my own needs, or what I do not want. Only that. Just now, I absolutely needed your tulsi tea. I would not have shared that with anyone", he said with a child's innocent and mischievous smile.

Munni scratched her head. What is in excess of his needs and when – who knows? If anyone showed up even now, he'd surely offer him at least half a cup.

"And your... What about your family?"

"You people are my family. The four villages around here are my family."

"Did you leave your children behind too?"

"There weren't any."

"What about your woman?"

"I didn't have any. That's why there were no children. But in these villages, where I work, all the children are mine. Even your children, Munni."

Munni's three children lay inside the quilt, sound asleep. She felt deeply moved. For a moment she remained silent. The freezing wind outside had become wilder, whistling like some witch and howling, bent on mischief and making waves in the tresses of Mother Ganges. "It's very cold", she said and was quiet for a while. Then she raised her eyes: "So, you never married?"

“Why are you asking so many questions today, Munni?”

“Today is the only time I’ve ever gotten to sit with you, Master.”

“So many times I’ve asked you not to address me as Master” he said, a bit peevishly. “It’s true, I never married.” He’d better answer her or this silly fisherwoman would go on jabbering for a long time. His tone when he spoke was calm and gentle as usual.

So, he has never known the comfort of a woman. And, who knows, maybe many other comforts as well, the silly fisherwoman thought. He lives all alone in a bamboo-fenced hut. Boils rice and potatoes together in a pot. Washes his own thaali, his own clothes, goes around rattling his bicycle. In his own land he must have owned an automobile; his appearance tells you he belongs to a noble family. But here I heard that once he was lying alone burning up with fever. By chance someone happened by a young man from a Muslim family in some other nearby village who took him away. I heard that he told him: “Don’t make a big fuss if I die. Bury me in my hut in the clothes I’m wearing. There you’ll find a notebook. If possible, let the folks on the address written in that notebook know, and that’s all.” Did Munni’s own husband ever mention his address to anyone?

Thinking of her husband, she felt a pang in her heart, a merciless pang. Munni used to get the food ready when he returned. She would jump up to give him water from a spouted jug. They were never hard-up when he was around, always able to put together at least a plain meal- but at least they ate at every mealtime. And then at night, there was that divine comfort of being with him under a thick sheet, in a bed of straw. She didn’t even know if he was alive now. Perhaps no one had any address to send information about his death. But when he was around, he was quite happy. Whenever she felt a pang in her heart, she comforted herself by recalling

that the two of them had spent a good life together. She gave him as much comfort as she was able. In the same way, her memories of her son were sweet. She was content that in the last two or two-and-a-half days of his life, he had some good food to eat, even some fruit. If it hadn't happened, the memories would have burst her heart without putting any dressing on her wounds. She would still be writhing in pain and crying.

"Want me to massage your head? Finding it hard to sleep?" she asked, as she took the last sip of tea and put the empty cup down.

"You need to sleep yourself now. You have to leave early in the morning to buy fish. Go, go now" he said, admonishing her a bit.

He's still worrying about me, she thought. For a moment she stood there hesitating. Then she put some kindling in the basin and moving aside, slid herself crookedly under the quilt beside her children. She had already given her blanket over to him to use. Here, there were four of them under one quilt. In her attempt to keep her children covered, she would get uncovered herself time and again.

At about two, an intense feeling of cold awakened her fully. The wind was screaming hard as though a thousand female demons, rustling their skirts, were passing over the Ganges, or dissatisfied souls had risen up from the pyres burning along its banks. Mother Ganges herself seemed annoyed and irritated, as though she was still descending the mountainous slopes — fast, intense and terrifying — even though she was now flowing through the land between the rivers. Munni, whom nothing could scare, was a little frightened at that moment. At what, she herself couldn't figure out. The snake, as though itself scared, had retreated inside the guava leaves, and a very chaste and pious man was asleep outside under the overhang. So, then what was she afraid of?

A little perturbed, she went and stood close to where he was resting his head. The rise and fall of his breathing and his soft snores bespoke his deep sleep. After a while she sat down right there. The fire in the basin had gone out, but the ash still had embers hidden in it and felt warm. She poked it with a twig and sparks flew.

Wrapping herself again and again with the hem of her sari, thinning due to excessive wear, she sat there thinking for a while. Then she slid slowly under the blanket close to his body. A youthful body of twenty-eight, robust from hard work, taut like a stretched bow and glowing with desire like the flame of a lamp.

The creation of Eve with Adam wasn't so purposeless after all. "Master, don't leave the world without at least knowing this. Your soul will always be wandering about. This comfort, whether you suffer consequences or not, at least know it once...."

He was awakened. Black and bright-eyed like a rohu fish, the tall, thin, sturdy woman lay with her arms around his neck. Bells began to ring all around him - tun, tun, tun - of danger, of trouble, of some improbable prophecy, filled with music, but frightening – his whole body was shaking like a skiff rocked by a storm.

Although Mahatma Buddha was a follower of ahimsa, if someone dropped a piece of meat in his begging-bowl, he never refused it.

But when, to lead him astray, the demon Maar sent his daughters wasn't the Buddha able to defeat them? Hadn't he overcome his desires completely?

Yes, but I am not a Mahatma, he thought, not even a Buddha. When did I achieve moksha? I haven't even gone out looking for it. But yes, if by serving mankind one can achieve it, then I might get it one day. And what did the yogis with the pierced ears think – that the comfort given by a woman was akin to the merging of atman [soul] with Parmatma [the

Supreme Soul]? What harm would there be if I found out once what it was like, before I died? I have known the pleasure of alcohol, the satisfaction of a full meal, the joy of deep sleep, of a mother's lap, of a woman's love: I know what they all taste like. The only thing I have not known is a woman's body. Perhaps I haven't been able to overcome my desires fully yet, or these flames would not have flared up on this freezing cold night. By now I would have pushed this crawling, flailing fish back into the Ganges.

The flames had flared up many times before as well. He was, after all, human. But he had doused them with the water of curses and disdain. And every time he had vowed to do penance by observing three day-long fasts, which were even more difficult than the fasts ordained for the Muslims in the sense that even after ending the fast he would not eat a full meal, oftentimes making do with just a boiled potato or a cucumber.

The latest actually happened quite recently.

This time it was the turn of the village on the other side of the outcrop island. He was taking a sick man back home after a visit to the hospital. There, at the water-well stood a new bride, Sunanda, recently wed and arrived in the village. To draw the water out, she had put one foot ahead of the other and stretched her body taut. She looked very pretty – her golden skin, the hue of ripe wheat, her feet neat and graceful, adorned with a single silver anklet. While pulling the bucket from the well, her whole body seemed to tremble. It appeared as if she wasn't used to drawing water from the well in her parents' house. Her sari was slipping off her body again and again. A little plump, her soft, supple body seemed to be spilling out of the blouse. His glance stopped briefly at her pretty feet and then slithered straight up to her neck. The tremor of her body was transferred to his own. Swearing at himself, he turned his eyes away, but he understood very well that the time his gaze had rested on her body was too long, that the duration of his

stare was “inappropriate.” His eyes were not just praising a beautiful creation of God..... they were of a man who was admiring a woman. He imposed penance on himself because he had no satisfactory answers for the questions his conscience had been posing to him.

The fish looked at him again with her bright, black, kohl-laden eyes. Don’t leave this world with thirst in your heart, ascetic! Learn what you do not know. Assure yourself that the baser self you’ve overpowered is really a very headstrong horse, impossible to rein in. Later on, you may go on patting yourself on the back, but at least this once... just this once....

That moment did not give him leave to think another thought. It invaded him, just as the ineffectual Gandak River in Nepal, after the snow has melted, becomes murderous and invades the powerful Ganges, which in spite of all its rage and fury is obliged to twist and turn to accommodate and absorb Gandak within itself.

In the morning, when he woke up, he could not understand what it was that had happened. Was it a hallucination or a pleasant dream? With a feeling of dread, his intelligence and understanding informed him that it was not a dream, but reality; and what was even more terrifying was that, after clearing up the cobwebs of sleep, his heart and mind were experiencing a state of exhilaration. His body seemed to be succumbing to a rapturous pain. His soul had received some indelible marks. His heart was bursting. All his discipline, his austerity, was no longer of any avail, but it was pleasing to him.

Munni had woken before him. Even in this cold she had drawn water from the well and bathed. She had already put on tea to boil for him on the clay hearth. There was no feeling of embarrassment in her sedate eyes, no trace of sin. There was just contentment and a sense of peace. Her most beloved human being had come to her door and she had put whatever she had in his begging bowl-neither more nor less. She had

placed a sweet potato roasted in hot ashes on a clay saucer and poured tea into an aluminum cup. He pushed aside the sweet potato and picked up the tea.

After finishing the tea, he stood up.

They came face to face in front of the door of the hut.

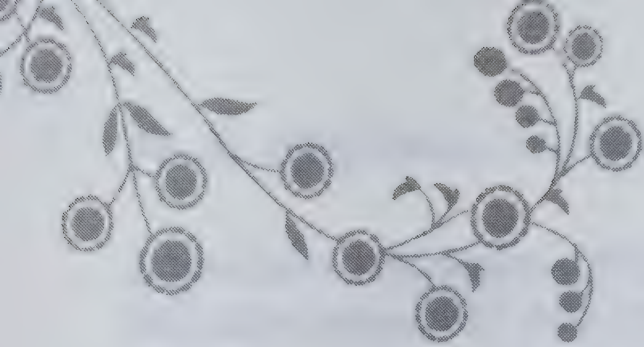
Munni folded her hands together. "I'll never again ask you to stay, Lord. Don't be afraid."

"For the rest of my life, I shall do penance for last night by eating only one meal a day", he said quietly. "But I am grateful to you, Munni Ma, and shall always be." Suddenly he bent down and touched her feet. "You'll not need to worry about asking me to stay. I'm going away, leaving this area for good."

And he disappeared quickly into that dark, smoky morning, damp and shivering from the cold.

—*Translated by Faruq Hassan*





2

Long Live the Ganges! (Har Har Gangé)



As soon as she heard the rumble of Verma ji's rickety Land Rover, Mrs. Verma quickly put her hand on her waist and got up. "O Ram Da'i! Your Sahib's back. Start grinding five kilos of spices", she said cheerfully, adjusting the huge bindya on her forehead.

Verma ji was returning after a whole week at the farm. A hunting maniac, he often brought back a deer or a few waterfowl. Today, however, the jeep held quite a few live animals besides the game: a boy about ten years old, three girls, a man clad in a dhoti, and a pregnant woman, all as black as coal, half-naked, emaciated, and with yellow eyes and white teeth stuck into their terribly dark faces. Where had Verma ji picked up all this trash?

Those strange-looking creatures promptly moved forward to touch Mrs. Verma's feet in obeisance. She spontaneously backed away a little.

"Babu Lal!" Verma ji called the servant. "Take them to Badhia's hut. It's empty. Show it to them. Then see to it that the deer is taken off the jeep. I got him early today."

And these – when did you get these? she thought to ask about the five wild humans, but she'd made it a habit not to question her husband too much when he was ready to go out or had just come back.

Deer kebabs were prepared. They turned out to be quite delicious. Smacking his lips Verma ji said, "O Ram Da'i, take

a few kebabs to the people in Badhia's hut." Then he told his wife, "Have a bit of chura and a clump of raw sugar sent over as well. They must be hungry." Working his toothpick he explained, "They're very poor. I wonder if they've ever had enough food to fill their stomachs. And you've already seen how little they have to cover their bodies."

"So why have you dragged them here?" Mrs. Verma gave her husband a questioning look.

"Never mind, they won't be any trouble. Your knees ache, don't they? At least now you won't have to worry about finding someone to massage and rub oil on them. And that Lakkhi, he knows gardening. In the past he worked some man's fields."

My knees ache? Mrs. Verma wondered. And what about Ram Da'i, isn't she meant to serve me? But, yes, a gardener we do need. Badhia used to do that work. God knows what got into Verma ji that he found him a job with the railway. Now Badhia even has a brick house to live in, so why would he bother to look in our direction? The plants are dying and the whole lawn has turned brown. She relented a bit, but then quickly came to her senses: Why all this excess baggage along with the gardener? Badhia was single. He worked for fifty rupees and meals. How can fifty rupees support a whole family? As if Verma ji had read her thoughts he said, "They'll grow their own vegetables, no problem there. Just give them a little grain. They'll manage."

Why, of course! Only a few in the house and a whole slew of domestics to serve them! Mrs. Verma thought as she washed her hands. Too late to do anything now; my whole life I've always had to submit to your whims.

Next morning Lakkhi's woman, her seven-month pregnant belly bulging, came to touch Mrs. Verma's feet. "Now that we will be living under your protection, Mistress, how might I serve you?"

“You’re going to serve me?” Mrs. Verma said somewhat curtly.

“I’ve been sitting here idly since yesterday, Mistress. Back where we come from, we’d spend whole days planting paddies in knee-deep muddy water.”

“How much did you make?”

“If the whole family worked, rice enough for two meals. After the planting was done, only one. Sometimes not even that. Instead we fed the kids what little there was. That’s all Harihar the vegetable grower gave us.”

Mrs. Verma remembered something. A few boys and girls wearing Kolhapuri chappals used to visit her elder daughter-in-law with sacks hanging from their shoulders. Most of the time Mrs. Verma couldn’t make heads or tails of what they said. One time they were talking about a tribe in Chhota Nagpur that could only find grass and leaves to eat; its whole population was slowly dwindling as a consequence of contracting every conceivable disease by drinking polluted water from muddy ponds.

“Who knows what’s happening and in what corner of the world”, Mrs. Verma had said peeling water-soaked almonds for navratan chatni. “The poor, we’ve seen them too, lots of them, so poor they survive on a single roasted green chilly, a little salt and plain rice. But never so poor that they slept on an empty stomach.”

The fair face of the girl who was talking about the tribe turned red and the rest looked visibly annoyed too. Mrs. Verma’s daughter-in-law looked embarrassed, as if apologetic over her mother-in-law’s crass insensitivity and foolishness.

“Auntie, you’re our elder and we’re in your home. It doesn’t seem right to say anything to you, but you live in a fancy two-story house in this posh colony, how could you ever know how many people in our country go to bed without a morsel to eat, or how many are deprived of clean drinking water, or.....”

“Or how the rice silos of people like you get filled”, a boy butted in, his tone extremely bitter.

At the time, Mrs. Verma considered this entire speech a craving for leadership, pure sentimental garbage. Today, however, she had a woman sitting across from her saying that when the planting season ended her family ate one meal a day and sometimes went to bed without eating anything at all. Whatever her children had on their bodies didn’t amount to more than a scrap of loincloth. Her own body had nothing to speak of above her waist. She had covered her breasts with a threadbare old rag of a dhoti. But then that was life. All kinds of people live in this world. A person can’t go on feeling sad about everyone else’s suffering, nor take care of everyone’s needs.

“Ram Da’i, bring me some rubbing oil.” She stretched out on an easy chair in the mild October sun. Meanwhile the woman had already started kneading Mrs. Verma’s calves with her emaciated fingers. She rubbed so energetically that soon all the pain vanished and Mrs. Verma began to feel drowsy.

Ram Dhani’s Ma’e (mother), as she preferred to be called, although her firstborn was a girl and Ram Dhani came after-continued performing her service and, a couple of months later, gave birth to another girl, just as dark and emaciated as her mother. It must be said, though, that ever since arriving at the Vermas’ she and her children never had to go to bed hungry, and they got not just rice, but also potato mash or a dish of squash. Compared to the shirking city lout Badhia, Ram Dhani’s father proved to be an absolutely first-rate gardener. Verma ji’s big garden was filled with flowers until the advent of winter, and the kitchen garden flourished as well. Both Verma ji and his wife were very fond of flowers and greenery so they were quite pleased with these people.

“How are you going to marry off not one, not two, but this slew of four girls, Ram Dhani’s Mother? A simple operation would take care of you. Why not have it?” God knows how

many times Mrs. Verma had repeated this exhortation. Of course she had the best interests of Ram Dhani's Mother at heart, but there was also the fear that if this family kept increasing at such a speed, the gardener would cost her dearly.

After a year, when no doubt remained that the new arrival to the family was deaf and mute, Ram Dhani's mother consented to a hysterectomy. What if she ended up with more girls who were deaf and mute? The thought horrified her.

Back home, indifferent to the problems that had preoccupied his parents, Ram Dhani had spent his time swimming with the buffalos in the village pond. He had become quite an expert at holding his nose and plunging into the water. A few days after arriving in Patna, he had made friends with the son of the orderly of Mrs. Verma's neighbor. Babbu often used to jump into the Ganges early in the morning and retrieve the coins thrown into the water by the relatives of those brought to the cremation ground. If he got lucky and retrieved a few rupees, he would spend the money on chaat and barf-malaii from the vendor and would heartily enjoy eating the delicious treats. It was Babbu who had introduced Ram Dhani to these two heavenly bounties and Mother Ganges.

The first time Ram Dhani saw the Ganges, he was completely stunned. Used to the little pond outside his home village, he had never seen so much water, and so blue and clear to boot, rising in waves, creating whirlpools. "Good grief!" His eyes bulged out just as they had when he'd seen the winnowing-basket full of chura and the clump of crop-fresh raw sugar in front of him, and deer-meat kebabs on top of that – never before in his life had he seen so much food at once, and no one in seven generations of his family had ever eaten kebabs. Oh Patna, what a wonderful city you are! He would never set foot in his home village ever again.

Gradually Ram Dhani got used to Mother Ganges, just as he had to eating a bellyful of food, to a thatched roof overhead

that didn't leak during the rains, to electric lights, and to a nice, clean place. He gingerly started getting into the water, but only while holding on to Babbu's hand. Later, he started jumping in without the least bit of fear. The terror Mother Ganges had at first struck in his heart totally disappeared, and the stench of burning flesh from the cremations no longer bothered him. The village pond where he used to swim undaunted all day long was far filthier and more nauseating.

Ram Dhani loved his "Ma'e" immensely and she also loved him more than her four girls. She was always ready to fight with anyone on his account. Whereas the girls toiled alongside of her, Ram Dhani spent all of his time playing gulli-danda. Back in the village, however hard the times may have been, she always saved something for him to eat, never allowing him to go without food twice in a row. That's why, whenever he retrieved some coins from the Ganges, he didn't spend all of them on chaat as Babbu did. He saved some and gave them to his mother. With this money she had bought herself a braided hairpiece from the huckster and plastic bangles for the girls. And she no longer went half naked; Mrs. Verma had given her some blouses along with her old saris. Once her belly was full and her body covered, she got it into her head to pretty herself. Now and then she even bought herself a paan from the peddler at the corner.

It was the third rainy season since Ram Dhani had started coming here. The Ganga had swelled, but not dangerously. A few other boys were also swimming in it. They had swum slowly all the way under the bridge. A bus full of tourists was passing overhead. Some of the sightseers shouted "Long Live the Ganges!" and tossed a few coins into the water. Ram Dhani immediately dove under the water – and dropped to the bottom like a stone. He never surfaced again. Choking with fear, Babbu swam to the bank and started crying at the top of his lungs. An hour later he returned home to tell.

Some four kilometers beyond the city, when Karo, the dom, emerged from one of the huts along the bank of the Ganges, he saw a dead body floating by. His eyes were quite familiar with corpses of all stripes and colors—fresh or decomposed, pecked at by vultures, half-burned or intact, a child's or a grown man's. Before it came close, his experienced eyes had already figured out that the corpse was quite fresh and intact. He jumped up. Such immense good luck hadn't visited him in a long time. He splashed into the water without a second thought. He had dealings with some people in the city who traded in human bones. He often supplied them. He might rake in three, perhaps even four hundred, for this clean, fresh body. The price of everything had gone up lately, and such perfect bodies were only found once in a great while. Even if the poor did throw their dead into the river without burning them, they tied an earthen pot to the neck, or at least a few wooden logs. If the bones are damaged, they don't fetch a good price. True, some people did sneak into Muslim graveyards to steal bodies, but Karo feared complications and was satisfied with the bodies that came floating to him of their own accord. He dragged Ram Dhani from the water and covered him with a pile of hay.

Verma ji and his Assamese Muslim tenants searched far and wide along the bank of the Ganges for several hours and even sought help from quite a few boatmen. Finally, in despair, they decided to return home. Just as they were leaving, one boatman told them about some doms living further down the river who were always looking for corpses. They might know something. Why not talk to them? Mother Ganges hadn't yet come into full tide so it's unlikely she would cause a body to disappear in just a few hours. It's quite possible one of the doms fished it out and stowed it away.

The boatman's speculation turned out to be right, but Karo gave them a real run-around. At first he wouldn't even admit it, later he started to wrangle about money. "Go on, call the

cops”, he dared. “They’ll take the corpse with them, cut it up, and only after that will you get it back. We poor people risk our lives plunging into the Ganges just to make a few paisas. That’s why we fished it out of the water. Otherwise you wouldn’t even find a trace of it. Just watch, one of these days we’ll end up drowned ourselves doing this dangerous business.”

They got the body back, but only after counting out full hundred and fifty rupees.

Ram Dhani’s mother stood as still as a stone, staring at her feet. “Next time you save a little money, buy some aaltaa (red color) to dye your feet”, Ram Dhani had told her. Now, even if she ever did save some money, she would never have the heart to dye her feet. If she did, she would only see her Ram Dhani’s blood splattered there. Where has that son, whom she had lovingly fed even if it meant starving herself, floated away to? That emaciated, half-naked woman who worked in the village fields all day long up to her knees in muddy water, and returned home in the evening with a fistful of rice which she boiled only to give the first mouthful to her son! That son who had lit up her womb, where had he disappeared to after smearing it with the mud dredged from the bottom of the Great Ganges? When she saw the corpse, such a painful cry shot out from her chest, and she cried so hysterically that it might have shaken the universe, but perhaps it was not enough to move the one who obliterates even the images of his own making with a flick of the finger, like an afterthought. That dreadful, ominous crying spread everywhere in the wilderness like the hoot of an owl. Quite a few people from the neighborhood gathered around her. A poor village mother was writhing on the ground, pounding her chest, all the while repeating the name of her only son. Four little girls stood by in a state of shock and fear, as if unable to understand what had happened. A simple, innocent-looking man stood silently, continuously wiping his eyes with his shoulder cloth. No one to console, no

one to call one's own! It was such a moving scene that even the breeze stood still. Mothers quickly drew their children close to themselves others spontaneously thanked the Lord that their children were nearby and safe.

"Ram Dhani's Ma'e" Mrs. Verma began, pressing her knees with her hands in an effort to get up, "what was fated has come to pass. Now start making arrangements for the cremation. The corpse has been in the water since morning." She quietly put some money in her hands. Her Assamese tenants gave some too, and more came from the people who had gathered. It added up to seven hundred rupees.

Sometimes decisions are made silently in the eyes. Lakkhi handed the money to his wife. In the evening darkness, he wrapped the body of his son in his own tattered dhoti, the same one he was wearing when he first set foot in this house. Babbu's father was still hanging around out of compassion. The two of them lifted Ram Dhani's body and set out.

The turbid waters were churning in a rage. The lights of the city were shimmering far in the distance. The city curved sharply along the river. Somewhere close by, a band of pilgrims headed for Dev Ghar raised the cry "Har Har Gangey! Har Har Gangey!"

"Har Har Gangey!" Lakkhi repeated the words under his breath. He caressed the boy's head, kissed him on the cheek, bowed reverentially before Mother Ganges and committed the body gently to the waves.

—*Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon*



Bidda Lives on



“Imali ke patta, nava nava patta, khada raho beta,
dalle chhu, dalle chhu, dalle chhu!”

(New shoots on the tamarind tree; come on sonny, stand and see, I am coming to touch you, touch you, touch you!)

Chanting the ditty, the kabaddi players could be counted in dozens and the ruckus they created made one feel like the Day of Judgment had arrived. A player from the opposite team was out; the din gathered more volume...ho ho ho.

November chill was in the air. The cold breeze swept in the house carrying high pitched voices on its wings. On the hot iron griddle Amma’s thinly rolled chapati puffed up like a balloon. Taking it off with a pair of tongs she babbled, “These urchins seem to have been fed with lion’s fat or else why wouldn’t they feel the cold? It is already time for dinner and they are playing kabaddi on the street. Even their parents do not seem to bother...”

Safia chuckled. Worrying her head over the matters that belonged to others, Amma used to drive herself crazy. She not only kept her own children cooped up like poultry, but wanted the whole neighborhood also to follow suit.

“What is there to laugh about?” Amma really got angry. “A mound of leafy greens is waiting to be cleaned. The dinner will get late again!” Safia pulled the wicker basket close to her and started separating tender leaves from mature stalks. The

heat emanating from the earthen stove felt soothing. Another sign heralding the arrival of winter.

Suddenly an earthquake seemed to rock the house, kitchen and all. It was Bidda pounding up the stairs, taking two at a time, calling out to Safia at the top of her voice, “Sappho, hey Sappho Rani ho...”

Now this gross distortion of her name irked Safia no end. She had tried to correct Bidda so many times but the ‘f’ in Safia remained the same ‘ph’. Actually Bidda’s own name was a distortion of Vidya but there were hardly four to five people who knew it. These included the Pandit ji who had presided over the name-giving ceremony on the sixth day after her birth. The rest of the world did not know what Bidda stood for and did not bother to know either.

Calling out her own version of Safia’s name, making Safia’s blood boil, Bidda darted straight into the kitchen. Plump and fair, wearing a wristful of glass bangles, vermillion in the parting, Bidda was all of fourteen and already given in marriage. This year her gauna ceremony was due. She would formally be sent to her husband’s house to start living with him, but first Pandit ji had to decide the auspicious time for it.

“Hey you, won’t you decorate the dollhouse this time?” she addressed Safia, panting. Her anklet bells tinkled as she continued. “Tomorrow is dhanteras and day after, Diwali.”

“Yes, why not? We will do it tomorrow itself”, replied Safia, suppressing the excitement in her voice.

Bidda was extremely conscious of her marital status and also of being a little older. Both gave her an edge over Safia, also the authority to find faults in her housework and give a word of advice or two. Right now too, she plonked herself on the kitchen floor and started taking out some stalks from the already-cleaned spinach leaves. Safia pulled a long face. “Oh come on, they will all soften and how do a few matter any way?”

“Oh yes, even the hands and feet of a goat soften once they are cooked and gobbled up by you so fondly.” Bidda, who was a vegetarian, always teased Safia for gobbling up ‘hands and feet’ of poor goats. She knew Safia loved trotter curry.

Amma started laughing. “This friend of yours is really clumsy, Bidda. If asked to peel potatoes, she peels them so thickly that only half of them go to the cooking pot, the rest land in the dustbin. Why don’t you teach her some tricks of the trade? Like you, she too, will get married one day.”

Bidda rolled her kohl-lined eyes mischievously, picked the rest of the greens in no time, pushed the basket towards Amma and got up to leave.

Safia gnashed her teeth and decided not to go to decorate Bidda’s dollhouse, but the next day no sooner did she hear Bidda calling “Sappho” than she bolted down the stairs like an arrow.

Taking great care, Safia mixed colours in small bowls. Bidda pulled out a terracotta plate from the heap of clay toys, and filled it with pedas. Safia loved this special Diwali sweet but did she need any bribe for splashing colours on the traditional dollhouse, an integral part of Diwali celebrations? In no time images of gods and goddesses, lotus flowers, ducks in a pond, the rising sun, flying birds and clumps of trees, all came alive on Bidda’s gharonda; this year too hers was the best in the entire neighborhood.

“Long live my Sappho.” Bidda hugged Safia, winked at her and said, “Diwali over. Now I will come to you to have the letter written.” Now what irked Safia next to being called Sappho, was being winked at, that too by Bidda. Irritated, she retorted, “Why don’t you ask Kalu to write it for you? Now he is in class six; can do the job well.”

“You shameless creature! Can a girl ask her brother to write a letter to her husband on her behalf?”

Now this letter writing business was something rather weird.

Bidda was a primary school dropout. Once she left school, she forgot even what little she had learnt. On the other hand, the boy she was married to had not only done his matriculation, but was quite romantically inclined too. He wrote regularly to his bride, who had not joined him yet, and expected just as regular, love-lorn letters in reply. Bidda not only took time in writing one but also made many mistakes. Dictating the letter to Safia was the easy way out. As a good friend, she was ever so ready to oblige.

Safia really felt sheepish. How could she be so daft as to expect a brother to write his sister's letters addressed to her husband? But teasing? Yes, he was the most appropriate target for that, especially when he happened to be younger. "Kaloo! Bhaloo!! Khaloo!!!" Wiping her colour-stained hands on a rag she shouted out loud.

Kalu's half yearly exams were scheduled just after the Diwali holidays. He was learning multiplication table, at the same time wishing death to all his teachers, especially the mathematics teacher. Exercising great control, he tried to ignore the insult of being called 'Kaloo the bear' and 'Khaloo the uncle'. Seeing no reaction, Safia tried a more effective measure:

"Two billy goats, reared our dear Kaloo,
One died of coughing,
Of sneezing, the other, too"

Kalu could never imagine anyone rearing goats in his family, not in the generations that had passed, nor the ones that had yet to come. Besides, this ludicrous doggerel could be tolerated if chanted by street urchins, not when this chit of a girl recited it. The multiplication table had also got stuck at eighteen times seven. So the big fat maths exercise book was thrown at Safia and landed right on her head. Just then, dabbing her face with the end of her sari, Kalu's mother emerged from the adjoining room.

“You wretch! Don’t you know that you are insulting Saraswati, the Goddess of knowledge, by throwing the book like this?” she shouted. “Instead of helping decorate your sister’s dollhouse, you are harassing poor Saphho who is doing it. Go to live in a pig sty.”

Muttering her favourite swear words of sending people to a pig sty, Kaki disappeared just as she had appeared a moment ago. Kalu tugged at Safia’s long plait so hard she barely escaped a fall. Bidida gave Kalu two tight whacks. Mayhem ensued.

Mayhem and Kalu were almost synonymous. The very sight of the prankster made Safia itch to say something which irked him. But on the day of Bidida’s gauna ceremony, her heart went out to him. The boy who always behaved like a bull in a china shop, was sobbing like a little child who had lost his way in a jungle with no exit in sight. She went close to him and put her reassuring hand over his head. The feel of Kalu’s thick silky hair lingered on her palm for a long time. A few years later, a similar feel was retained by Kalu’s hand when he put it on Safia’s head at the time of her departure to her husband’s house. His eyes had brimmed over thinking of Bidida, who was so wrapped up in the affairs of a life of her own that her visits to her parental home had become few and far between. Decorating dollhouses at Diwali had become a thing of the past; there was no one to fight with, no one to receive the sweet scolding from. Forgetting he was a man who is not supposed to shed tears, he burst out crying.

As the Air India jumbo jet touched the ground at New Delhi airport, the chanting of those small town children playing kabaddi on the street got superimposed on the impeccable English of the air hostess announcing landing. “Imali ke patta; Nava nava patta”, voices that dated back to almost a quarter of a century. Perhaps with children creating a ruckus as usual, they still reverberated in the lanes and by-lanes. Early in the morning

the wizened halwa vendor would still be calling, “Halwa, fresh halwa, dripping with ghee!” His shrill voice, just as cutting as the chilly winter morning, would be making children sit up in their beds, demanding money from their parents and just then, some elderly person would comment, laughing, “The crook! He makes halwa with vegetable oil, only smears some ghee on top”, and Kaki would still be giving a nudge to this stubborn brat Kalu, shouting, “Go to the pig sty”, and during Diwali, Bidda must be erecting and decorating her dollhouse, without Safia.

“Imali ke patta...imali ke patta...” – even during the train journey from Delhi to her hometown, children played kabaddi along the railway tracks, peered through the window, hovered around her, passing years notwithstanding.

When the train pulled up at her destination, Safia, without waiting to get down, craned her neck to see whether the old gulmohar tree was still there. Yes, it was. Taller and greener, it had become immense. The years that had gone by had done it good. The air smelt of Diwali. Mounds of milky white puffed rice, and delicate-as-air batashas were selling on the road. Small little earthen lamps, toys made of clay, specially elephants and dolls washed in a mixture of lime and mica, to give them that glitter, icons of goddess Lakshmi and Ganesha. All so familiar. Any minute Bidda will appear carrying a large platter of puffed rice and an assortment of sweets with an extra packet of pedas, especially meant for Safia and their faces will brighten up in the light of phuljhadis.

Safia’s ten-year-old son who had not visited his grand parents’ house after the age of one and a half was watching everything in wonderment. All this was quite amusing for him but the tears rolling down Safia’s cheeks while climbing the stairs of her parental home were beyond his comprehension. “Why is Mummy crying incessantly for no apparent reason? She has never behaved so daftly!” he mused.

“Aapa would always be welcome here but she has chosen the wrong time.” Safia’s younger brother’s wife was saying. “Thank God, she hasn’t brought her daughter along.”

Her tone made Safia uneasy. Why wrong? She deliberately wanted to come during the festive season. There in Dubai she missed Holi and Diwali so badly. Their lights, their colour, the rustic, colourful toys. They figured in her dreams. And that semi-literate childhood friend, who could not write her letters herself and tormented Safia to write them on her behalf, that too to her husband. Why should she not have come now? Diwali is such a beautiful festival. Bright and sweet and loving!

Safia came to the terrace. Pushing the reed curtain aside a little, she peeped outside, her eyes scanning the neighbourhood. All those children were there. Real – of flesh and blood. Under the thatched roof, Tahir Miyan’s sewing machine was running as ever. Sitting by its side, his billy goat was merrily chewing the fodder. Chhote Lal, after having a hearty breakfast of fried vegetables and kachories, was belching noisily in satisfaction. Shopkeepers were decorating their shops to lure the Dhanteras customers who would come thronging in the evening.

Suddenly the street started reverberating with unpleasantly loud and harsh shouting, sharp and threatening and laced with abusive words. Safia’s sister-in-law came out, exasperated.

“What is happening Aapa? Whatever has happened?”

“Can’t say. Perhaps some people have started a quarrel. All at once”, Safia said nonchalantly.

“May God help us. Your brother is not back yet. Had gone to buy some sweets for you.”

“Altaf must be coming. Why are you so worked up? Squabbles of this kind are so very common.”

“You don’t know what the atmosphere is like these days” she said, suppressing irritation in her voice. Just then, some child burst a loud cracker; she jumped, fright writ large on her face. Her young teenage son, Amir, too, joined them. His mother

pulled him behind but he protested. "Let me assess the situation," said he. In that instant Safia found Amir growing up beyond his years. Grown up and serious. But just the next minute the whole neighbourhood heaved a sigh of relief. Residing in the adjoining by lane, from a family of goldsmiths, someone had been drinking the whole night. Inebriated, he had returned in the morning, now creating a racket. Some women had also jumped into the arena, making their contribution to the commotion that had ensued.

Safia started laughing. On such occasions Noor Mohammad Chacha, with his long, quivering beard, used to come out to give his free services as trouble shooter; sometimes by making people see the light, sometimes by giving them a good dressing-down. Everyone listened to him. "Now he has no say even in the matters that pertain to his own family. Old and rendered powerless, now he crouches in a corner of his house. And, why only Noor Mohammad Chacha, all those old fogies who talked of peace and goodwill are obsolete, a thing of the past."

"And Kaki?" Safia was perturbed by the bitterness in her sister-in-law's voice.

"She died some three years ago."

Safia drew her breath in. Staggering under the yolk of life, producing and raising children, stretching their limited resources like rubber, arranging marriages, extending a helping hand to whoever needed it, neglecting their own requirements, Kaki and Amma were both gone. The last time that Safia had come home they were there. Safia's son, at that time, was about a year old. She sent a message to Bidda's village and she arrived the very next day. In an embroidered shawl, her plump, fair, youthful face shone like the full moon. She, like a magician, produced a thick silver band from under her shawl, slipped it on the boy's wrist and, rolling her kohl-lined eyes as usual, said, "Have a look at me, son, and don't you dare forget, I am your mausi, your mother's sister." Then showering him with blessings she

scooped the child up in her arms. After some time came Kaki, whose eyes were dim with cataract and knees bent with arthritis. From the end of her old, crumpled sari she took out a five rupee note and quietly slipped it into the child's palm.

After Kaki had left, Amma said, "Consider this small amount a treasure. After her husband's departure, the poor woman does not have any cash at hand. Kalu is earning enough but he thinks that after being fed two square meals an old woman does not require any money. You give it to her, she will splurge unnecessarily." Taking a deep sigh she added, "My sons do not think any differently either."

When Safia tried to give some money to Amma she got very angry. "Can I take money from a daughter? And a married one at that! Your friend Bidda too, had insulted her mother in the same manner. She was so furious that she hit Bidda with her slipper. You deserve the same but I am a milder person. Don't worry I am not all that broke."

Bearing the cross of the same Indian middle class values Kaki and Amma both had disappeared from the earth they had walked together, once.

"Any news of Bidda? Does she come visiting?" Safia asked her sister-in-law who gave her a blank look.

"Bidda who? Raja Ram's sister?"

"Who else?" Safia's voice betrayed irritation.

"She is also no more; she died when her mother was still alive." She informed nonchalantly.

Safia was dumbfounded; it was as if a giant blow had knocked off all the Diwali lights and, the entire town had gone dark.

After long silence Safia gathered courage. "Is Raja Ram's family still residing here?"

"They are very much here."

"Can you send someone to inform them I am here? I am sure Kalu will come running. If he doesn't, I will go." Altaf's wife did not say anything. Quietly, she got busy in the kitchen.

Evening had started getting darker. Safia's desolate heart ached. Was it the age to die? She would have hardly entered her fifties. Sorrow swirled around her like a mist. In a weak effort to ward it off she turned to her niece, Reshma. "Haven't you bought some fire crackers. I love phuljharis."

"I am very scared of them", said Reshma, quietly.

"Why? Did you ever get burnt?"

"That Diwali the whole town burnt, Phoophi." Reshma's voice was bitter, the face a mask of fright.

It was as if somebody had put a knife through Safia's heart; disconcerted, she came out on the terrace again. Carrying a large brass plate, covered with a crocheted doily, taking long strides, a little girl was coming from the opposite direction. She looked uncannily familiar. Reshma who had followed Safia, said, "She is your Kalu...er, Raja Ram's daughter."

"Call her, Reshma, call out to her. What's her name?"

"Ok I will call her but I don't think she will come." Then she shouted her name, "Manju, hey, come here. Someone wants to see you."

Manju stopped short near the raised platform and looked up. By then Safia had bounded down the stairs. Pushing the reed curtain aside, she beckoned to the girl. "Come on in child, come on in."

Very reluctantly, the girl obeyed. Safia put her arm around her and pressed her close. She started staring at this strange, expensively dressed, middle aged woman in wonderment.

"Tell your Babuji..."

"We call him Papa", the girl interrupted.

Safia laughed. "Okay, tell your Papa that Altaf Chacha's elder sister has come. She wants to see you. And ask him since when he has become Raja Ram. His name was Kalu."

Still holding the girl close to her, Safia whispered into her ear, "Not only Kalu, it was Kaloo...Bhaloo...Khaloo!"

Surprise got replaced by a beautiful smile and the next moment she burst out laughing.

“May I know who you are?” The little girl could not curtail her curiosity any more.

Safia suddenly turned serious again. Putting her hand on Manju’s head she said, “I am your phua, child, your Papa’s sister.” Saying so, Safia felt that she had paid a little of Bidda’s debt back. She wiped her eyes.

Manju was again taken by surprise. How can her phua be in this house? She had some faint memories of Bidda phua. But affection was not beyond her comprehension. Going back, she turned to cast a glance at Safia, smiling.

Kalu did not turn up. Safia insisted on going to his place in spite of Altaf advising her not to.

“Raja Ram does not visit us anymore. We just exchange perfunctory greetings if we happen to run into each other. Sometimes I feel that both of us try to evade even this much of courtesy.”

“Reason?”

“Aapa, you are not all that naïve, you just love nitpicking. He has joined a political party. Some two years ago the town went through severe communal tension. It was proved that his party had a great role in it. Raja Ram himself was involved in writing provocative slogans on the walls of the town.”

“Altaf, you and Kalu went together to the same school”, Safia said plaintively.

“Yes, and together we stole guavas from Noor Chacha’s garden.”

“And when your school started a cleanliness drive, shovels in hand, you cleaned the overflowing drains together.” Safia’s heart was feeling as heavy as lead, yet a faint smile crossed her face. She had teased Kalu no end calling him a sweeper. The little boy who fought Safia, flailing his arms and legs all at once,

was now running a successful business, was married, had been blessed with three children. From Kalu he was transformed into Raja Ram, but where had his innocence gone during the process? Who had polluted his mind, heart and soul? Who had made him so xenophobic?

Next morning she went to see him.

Sitting on the raised stone platform, which constituted the front of most of the houses, he was scrubbing his feet with a pumice stone. The platform was the same; the whole ambience was the same. In one corner of the platform, holding its head high, stood the dollhouse of his daughters. Come evening, the tiny earthen lamps adorning its edges would shimmer like hope in human hearts.

Their eyes locked. He was startled, kept looking in disbelief. Many years rolled by.

“Hey, you know who I am or have you lost your wits completely?” she addressed him in the dulcet local dialect which only people here, in her hometown, could understand, but no one in Dubai.

“Yes, I do. Safia didi. When did you come?” His voice was bereft of any enthusiasm or cheer. Safia’s spirits dampened but she still managed to say, “I am sure you knew I was here. Why didn’t you come?”

He started scratching his head. “Business is expanding, life, too, has become demanding with so many family affairs to look into.” Then he called his wife, “Manju’s ma, look who has come.”

Safia continued, “Altaf says you hardly visit them. What is the matter? Have you two fallen out with each other? He looked sullen when I enquired after you.”

Kalu did not respond to this. Scrubbing his feet he called his wife again, this time asking her to bring two glasses of tea.

“Kalu, how did Bidda die?” Her voice was laced with tears. “Where are her people, children?”

Just then, tea in hand, his wife appeared in the doorway. Putting the tea tray on a nearby stool she greeted Safia.

“Now direct all your queries to her. She will tell you everything.” In the same breath, he told his wife, “She is Bidda didi’s childhood friend. Sit and talk to her.” He got up without even his tea. “I have to leave now. Have already got late for the shop.”

“Kalu I don’t want any tea. It is to see you and your family that I had come”, she said angrily but the sadness too could not be disguised. With a sense of defeat, she also got up.

Suddenly Safia saw Manju, eyes sparkling with mischief, come running. There was a boy behind her, giving her a chase. A little older, he seemed to be her brother. Seeing Safia, Manju stopped short. For a brief moment her eyes reflected surprise but the next minute, a shy smile, like rays of the sun peeping from behind the rain clouds, brightened up her face. Two little dimples appeared in her plump, fair cheeks; black beady eyes looked directly into Safia’s. Spitting image of Bidda!

“Papa, Papa, She is my phua, I told you about her, didn’t I?” Coming very close to Safia, touching her with her little hand, she said. And, in her angel-like countenance, Bidda came back to life.



The Echo of Days Past



Like a tragedy that swallows an entire family, the mammoth truck swallowed up all that was in their house.

Wiping her tears from the edge of her shroud, Chachi Amma, broke a green leafy branch from the neem tree that stood in a corner of the spacious courtyard, sniffed at it noisily and said, “The fragrance of our neem is so sweet and the breeze passing through its branches so cool!” Then, fanning herself with the sweet-smelling branch of her neem tree, she returned quietly to her grave.

“Come on, begin in the name of Allah, the merciful, the kind”, said Ali Miyan, the property dealer, who was also distantly related. Then he jumped onto the piled-up furniture. The immense vehicle made a great noise, rolled backwards a little, and then surged forward. Soon it disappeared from Meraj’s sight.

Babu Pyare Lal’s wife appeared from out of the blue. Weeping silently, she dabbed her eyes with the end of her sari. She was Chachi, Amma’s contemporary.

For some time now, Meraj had become part of a scene which he had never witnessed, had only heard about from his elder. A big, spacious courtyard, a neem tree standing in a corner with its massive canopy; white cows and black buffaloes tethered in the barn; a nearby pond which was full of algae, vines of water chestnut and large rohu fish. Dark brown little boys, swimming along with some ducks, splashed water, becoming entangled and freeing themselves in their quest for water chestnuts.

Whenever Meraj's elders stole some moments of togetherness, the scene was written and re-written on the murmuring winds. Chachi Amma and Babu Pyarelal's wife, who had come to see Chachi Amma off, and had brought the traditional items on a flat winnowing basket – an integral part of it – to wish her good luck. Sniffing incessantly, Babuji's wife rotated the basket around her friend's head and then smiled through the tears. "One should not weep when saying good bye, it is a bad omen," she said and started crying all over again.

Many such scenes were painted by Meraj's older relatives. Meraj was not a part of them, but they had been repeated so many times that they had become a part of his psyche: he grew up with them. Besides, though he had not seen Pyare Lal's wife crying, he had certainly seen his own mother, on many occasions, wiping her eyes quietly, while telling stories that haunted her.

"You were not even born and your elder sister was just two months old," went one such story. "I was still weak after a complicated delivery. Times were such that even the rustle of leaves made people prick their ears. And in those uncertain times our street was rocked by stomping feet and loud voices that shouted aggressive slogans. Shopkeepers downed their shutters, people ran helter-skelter, and women inside the houses started wailing, worrying about those who were out in the open."

"What happened then, Amma?"

"I decided that I could not bear the sight of my children being slaughtered mercilessly. I would push all three of them in the well that was in our courtyard and then jump in myself. Your grandmother was alive. She agreed."

Meraj was thoroughly confused. Children were strictly forbidden to go near the well. If any of them was ever seen there people started shouting, ordering immediate withdrawal. And here, the same watchful Amma was saying that she was going to throw her children into the well – all three of them – and grandma had agreed!

“Why were times like that, Amma?”

“I never found the answer to this question. Perhaps you will when you grow up”, she said ruefully.

(Meraj also could not figure out a satisfactory answer, even when he grew up and became a lawyer: in fact, no one did. The volumes of books that tried to solve the puzzle failed to do so.)

“What happened next, Amma? Obviously we were not thrown into the well.”

“Just then someone brought the news that all was well: it was just a fight between two groups of contesting wrestlers. Ordinary citizens were not involved. Though tense moments were not infrequent, our little town was one of those fortunate places where, by and large, peace prevailed.”

“And then?”

“The town expanded, engulfing the farm lands and parts of the jungle round about. Some industries were established and a couple of hotels came up. The intermediate college became a degree college; the town got the status of a district, but...” Amma became quiet, her face betraying the anguish that always gnawed at her heart. After a pause, she picked up the conversation again.

“But they never returned.” This time her voice betrayed the tears that were welling up from somewhere deep inside.

“Who never returned, Amma?”

“Your Nana – that is my father, my brother and his family, your paternal uncle, his wife and children, and so many of our clan. We were left alone to bear the brunt of events we had nothing to do with.”

Meraj had no concept of Nana (his maternal grandfather) whom he never knew. Dada (his father’s father) he knew well, as he lived until Meraj was quite grown up. But of course, Nana figured in the ditty Dada’s friend, Babu Pyare Lal, sang to Meraj:

“Nana, Nana, bhook lagi
 khalo beta moong phali
 Moong phali men dana nahi
 tum hamare nana nahi”

(Nana, nana, I am hungry; go, have some peanuts sonny,
 Peanuts do not have nuts inside; you are not our nana, is
 that right?)

For Meraj, Nana was like one of the characters he came across in stories like Aladdin in ‘Aladdin and His Magic’ ‘Lamp or Sindbad the Sailor–’ a gnome in fairy tales. He recited the ditties with relish. But one day, when he was reciting one of them, the roti Amma was baking on the hot griddle turned as black as she was: forgetting the roti and burying her head in her knees, she had started crying. Meraj’s father, Shamael, was very angry with Chacha Pyare Lal, though he did not say anything out of respect for the elderly.

Some time ago Amma’s family lived in the same town, just a few miles away, in the suburbs. They made frequent visits to meet Amma and her in-laws. Wasey, Amma’s brother and Shamael, her husband, had become friends. But after partition, Dada, realizing, that Amma’s family was thinking of opting to go to Pakistan, became wary of their visits, especially those of Wasey. He thought Wasey might influence his son, Shamael, to migrate with his family. The very idea sent a chill through the septuagenarian’s spine.

One day, his patience reached the brim. Without mincing words, he said to Wasey, “Look, son, you should not come to your married sister’s house so often. It is not customary. Besides I doubt your intentions.”

“Listen carefully. I am dead against this two-nation theory of Jinnah and some of the deviant Congresswalas. I am one of those millions of Muslims who consider India their home. I will die and be buried here. Shamael, his children and their children’s children will come to my grave to say fatiha over

it. So don't you dare to try brain-washing Shamael and your sister!"

"But Chacha", perhaps Wasey Mamu was also in a mood for a showdown. "Shamael Bhai is my brother-in-law, my own sister's husband; his future is very much my concern. I want the family to be safe. For that matter you, too. So I am only making him see the light."

"Only the future will tell how 'enlightening' this 'light' of yours is. You'd better mind your own business. Just let us know when you are leaving and we will come to say good bye." Dada turned his back on him, muttering, "God only knows how many millions will be carried away by this unfortunate high tide." His voice betrayed his anguish.

Wasey Mamu's family, whom he had shepherded to safety in 1948, came back to India in 1971, devastated, sans all their belonging – and Wasey Mamu. They were now foreigners to India, which was once their homeland. Like a bullet that has been shot, or the words that have been spoken, they could not be taken back. After initial sympathies, and help from relatives, they were sent back to Karachi.

Wasey Mamu's body could never be recovered. This time, Amma's anguish was beyond recovery. A permanent depression took over her.

So many times history committed blunders – blunders that could not be reversed. But could people not let the past be past and start afresh to minimize the painful aftermath? Hundreds and thousands of right-thinking people tried to find an answer to the question but they failed. Peace still evaded the subcontinent. Time flew by.

The major portion of the joint property of the four brothers was taken over by a custodian. The children grew up without knowing many of their first cousins, uncles, aunts. Meraj, too grew up and studied law to fulfill the wishes of his father and grandfather, married, had children

and shifted to a nearby big city as his profession had better scope there.

One day, an elderly gentleman came to see Meraj. He had gone to Pakistan to visit some relatives. Meraj's cousin, Huma, had sent some photographs and gifts for the children. When the children were shuffling through the photographs and asking about their unseen relatives, Meraj told them, laughing, "Huma could have been your mother, as Mamu wanted me to marry her."

The teenagers were quite amused, though their mother gave them a stern look. "What happened then?" they asked mischievously.

Meraj became serious. "Abba and Dada both blew their tops. They were dead against Mamu opting for Pakistan. So they abhorred the idea of having any matrimonial alliance with his family. It was not only for personal reasons. Relations between the two countries were never predictable. Besides, these family elders, along with many others, were against the principle of partition. They could never buy the two-nation theory. Though they had never joined active politics, they were die-hard supporters of Nehru and Gandhi."

"And yet those humiliating slogans were written on the walls of our house," said Meraj's daughter ruefully.

"And when Pakistan won a cricket match the boys in my school said that for me it was time to celebrate. I was dumbfounded and could not even understand why", said her brother.

"Now you know the reason." The girl was bitter.

"Papa, you know" she continued, "this time there was a tie between two girls contesting for the Miss India title. The judges asked a question as tie-breaker: "Given the power, which tragedy in the history of India would they like to avert?" One of the girls answered "Indira Gandhi's assassination" and she won. If I were in her place I would have said, "The partition of the country." "

Meraj gave her an intent look. There was pain on her face.

If the country was not divided, perhaps the situation, which gave rise to the murder of Indira Gandhi would not have arisen and, perhaps the Babri mosque would also not have been demolished and, had the Babri mosque not been demolished.....!

A riot had broken out in the city and, though the area was some distance away from Meraj's house, the tension in the air was palpable. So when someone pounded on the door, the entire family was terrorized. But just then they heard Meraj's friend, Jaiprakash, calling, "Come on, Meraj, open the door. The rioters are coming in our area. Hurry, I have come to take you out." In a flash of a second a shadow of doubt crossed Meraj's wife's mind. Elders of the family often mentioned that during the Bihar Sharif riots it was neighbors, close friends and domestics of long standing who had betrayed people, leading to mass-scale killings and destruction. But Meraj opened the door. An exasperated Jaiprakash instructed them to quickly pick up some cash, jewelry and clothes and leave immediately. He then huddled them into his car and brought them to the safety of his house. Before leaving, he removed Meraj's name plate.

After millennia of evolution the world had become highly complicated. Religion, class, caste, region, avarice, lust for power dominated. The showroom of the local rich cloth merchant was looted not so much to render a Mussalman a pauper, but to possess a good, warm coat.

Jaiprakash was getting threats for giving protection to Meraj's family. Ram Nath Tiwari was also intimidated, although he had not given protection to anyone, but had just formed a peace committee to bring normalcy back.

Once the riots abated, Meraj returned, but Jaiprakash advised him to shift to some other place. "I am not worried about my own safety: they won't kill me", he said "but I may

become helpless should some fresh eruptions take place. Won't it be better for you to shift to a neighbourhood of your own?"

"Neighbourhood of your own!" The words pierced his heart like an arrow. More than half a century ago Pyare Lal Chacha had advised Meraj's grandfather to shift at least his son, Shamael, and his family, across the border, to their 'own' land.

"Stay if you want to, but Shamael is young; his whole life lies ahead of him. Why put them to a disadvantage?"

He had accepted Wasey Mamu's logic. Nobody could doubt his intentions, all this was said in good faith. But Dada had been stung, just like Meraj was.

"Isn't this area my own? Don't I have the right to live in this part of my country, in the house built with my own hard-earned money?"

Dada, perhaps, had uttered the same words, albeit with much more anger and bitterness.

"Meraj, this area has suddenly become unsafe for you. There are only a couple of houses which belong to your community. When life is at risk, idealism takes the back seat. A property dealer told me that they are thinking of shifting to a safe area. Think over it, my friend. You and your family are very dear to me", Jaiprakash sounded genuinely concerned.

"Jaiprakash, could you tell me which place offers me foolproof security, where are the areas I can call exclusively my own? Some ghettos do exist, but do you think I should shift to one of them? Can't I live where I want to, in my own country?"

Jaiprakash scratched his head. It was almost a reflex action. Then he said: "There may be better options if you look for them. But in your own area you will, at least, be saved from tensions which crop up every other day. It is so unfortunate that festivals like Durga Pooja and Baqr Eid cause tension at times."

"Who is this person, and who he is talking to? Pyare Lal Chacha to Dada, or Jaiprakash to me?" thought Meraj.

After weeks of sleepless nights, Meraj called Ali Miyan. When the landlord was handing over the keys to Meraj, a man sipping tea in the nearby stall commented; “This time the riots taught a good lesson to these sahibs who, living in posh colonies, were riding their high horses. They are now taking refuge in our humble neighborhood.”

Meraj was stung by a strong feeling of guilt. No one could force his father or grandfather to leave, though the times were more turbulent. And here he was, selling his beautiful house in that good locality, coming here and facing such taunts. But then, is safety not above everything? Is Jaiprakash not right? Did his wife, Shahida, not agree to come here for the same reason?

And so, after some running around, selling and buying of the property, a truck arrived and swallowed all their belongings like a tragedy that swallows a family, a community or even a whole region.

With tearful eyes both families said good bye to each other. “Hope you will come soon to visit us in our new house”, Shahida said.

“We will keep visiting each other whenever we have time. You don’t have to say it, Bhabhi.” Jaiprakash said with a lump in his throat.

“I hope there won’t be any risk involved if we go to that area.” Though they had almost got into the car, Meraj’s wife overheard Sudha whispering into her husband’s ear. A shadow of deep anguish crossed her face. Quietly she wiped her tears. The car lurched forward and followed the truck.



Man

Once again, the Bagmati River was in spate. It was normal for it to start swelling at the onset of the monsoon, sometimes even before its arrival. When the snow melted in the Himalayas, the Bagmati acquired a swagger. In the beginning, the angry waters looked beautiful but soon they began to wreak havoc in villages downstream.

The river and its rich flora and fauna were eternal features of the small hamlet of simple rural folk who grew maize and kept livestock. Outsiders were not uncommon as the hamlet, which sat on the border, made it easy for people to slip quietly into Nepal if they so desired – and many of them did! Sometimes they went for shopping, while at other times for smuggling, but most of the time for crimes of greater magnitude.

Shortly before the Nepal border, women were sighted sitting outside their humble abodes, knitting sweaters, shawls, mufflers etc., over which their nimble fingers moved like machines. In the middle they would often get up to wash a child who had just relieved herself or drain the rice which was kept boiling on the chulah, or for some other housework. Finishing the job, they would return to their knitting nonchalantly. All these coarse, hand-knitted garments came into the market to provide comfort to the poor of the same kind as those who had knitted them, and so fetched a meagre profit at best. Snotty-nosed little children flitted about like birds in these settlements. Several

of these inhabitants had Nepalese features, such as soft, fair skin, slanting black eyes and slightly snub noses. With their rosy cheeks, the little children looked beautiful in spite of their poor, unkempt countenances. In the Kosi belt, such houses were common. The front doors opened in India while the back ones were in Nepal. Borders here were porous. As for animals, they don't have any borders anyway. Whether they enter from this side (to kill) or from the other side (to attack), it is of no consequence.

So it was difficult to discern whether the python came from across the border or was home-grown; or whether it came swimming in the Bagmati; or slithering through the dirt road used by human beings, but come it did. Snakes were not uncommon in the area. Especially in the rainy season, they were sighted hiding in the lush green grass or making their way into the jungle. Villagers avoided killing them. They said that if you steer clear of them they will not attack you, so why indulge in wanton killing? Animals being killed for food should be treated well until they are slaughtered – and that, too, with the least possible pain. Following this unwritten law, they did not keep their poultry in small suffocating cages. Birds were left free to forage during the day and brought to rest in large hen coops in the evening.

To cut a long story short, the python sneaked into the courtyard of Balu Thakur and made straight for the hen coop. Balu Thakur's old grandmother, whose sight had been dimmed by cataract and memory by age, had come to collect the eggs and had left the door insecurely bolted. When something untoward is ordained to happen, favorable circumstances come up to let it happen. The snake had an easy access to the birds.

It was midnight. The sleepy, terrified birds did not even raise an alarm as three or four of the large ones got swallowed up. In the morning, people saw the surviving birds skulking in a corner and the sated reptile sprawled lethargically across the

spacious coop. Then they had another shock. Balu Thakur's 10-year-old daredevil daughter was poking her fingers in the soft flesh of the python as if it were the dough her mother made for rotis. She loved to sink her fingers into it in spite of being reprimanded each time.

Commotion ensued.

Balu Thakur quickly brought his axe and hacked the python into two pieces, but not before dragging the audacious child away from sight. The snake did not offer much resistance, as it had become lethargic after swallowing a couple of fat hens. In any case, pythons rest for days after they have had their fill. After some time, the village cobbler, Dulare Das, made coarse footwear out of its skin, in which Balu Thakur and his wife flopped around.

One wishes it could be possible to skin some people and convert their skin into chappals!

This had transpired two monsoons ago. In the rainy season after the next, a leopard was found on the prowl. First it was sighted on the thatched roof of Bitthal's mud brick house. Two of his ewes had just lambed. The newly born were covered at night under a large wicker basket. It had stopped raining; a cool, moisture-laden breeze filled people with sweet languor. Trees were washed to an emerald green. Water, held in leaves, dripped in a steady trickle giving the illusion that it was still drizzling. In the wee hours of the morning a scream rent the air. It was Bitthal's son who had come to tend the sheep. "The leopard has made off with one of the lambs and has injured the other!" he shouted. People gathered. No one said anything immediately, but a little while later certain things were decided as safeguards against such attacks. Barns would be made stronger; women would not go alone early in the morning to defecate behind the bushes. They would go in a group of four to five with a staff in the hands of the young and strong ones, and they would be very vigilant.

The leopard picked up a few more small animals but there was no report of its attacking any human beings. One day, however, when a small group of women was returning from the fields, a woman who was lagging a little behind the others felt a presence. Something, or someone, was following her, stealthily, like a thief. The air carried an unfamiliar scent. It was neither flowers nor vegetation; neither cow dung nor any domestic animal. Bushes rustled as if wanting to say something. The secrecy of it made her hair stand on end. Was someone casting a spell? Will looking backwards turn one into stone? Still, the woman looked back. She did not turn into stone, but let forth a chilling scream and ran as fast as her legs could carry her. Others followed suit. The sudden reaction baffled the leopard who also ran and disappeared into the thick bushes.

He was one of those leopards who get baffled by such reactions. There are lots who simply do not.

Then, like a spectre, an elephant visited the village. He registered his presence by plucking and tossing aside the newly thatched roof of Nati Panditain's humble abode. With the monsoon round the corner, the poor woman had just had it repaired. At first, people thought it was the work of a squall, but then, no squall had hit the village in recent times. But don't houses get razed to the ground, rendering people homeless, even when there are no squalls? Perhaps yes, perhaps no, but isn't life full of such riddles?

Well, eventually the villagers came to know that it was the handiwork of an elephant which had entered the hutment and, apart from Naati Panditain's roof, had demolished the banana orchard belonging to the village head. People made a plan to somehow drive the beast back into the jungle, but they had to be on their guard until it was done. "I find Gajendra Bhaiya's brother-in-law more dangerous than these animals!" quipped a young girl sitting in the group, discussing

the maverick elephant. She was quickly hushed into silence by one of the elderly woman: “Hold your tongue, girl! After all, he is your kin.”

Soon people came to know that demolishing the banana orchard was not a solo performance. The elephant had done it in collaboration with a huge sloth bear which had made its entry by climbing the jackfruit tree standing in Noni Sao’s compound. The tree had a beehive, full of honey, sweet like a young girl who had ripened under the first flush of youth. Noni Sao had sent word for Bulaqi, who was an expert in extracting honey from beehives. The bear outdid Bulaqi by half a day. Bulaqi was expected in the afternoon, and the hefty bear broke open the hedge of reeds that surrounded the modest kuchha house at the first streak of dawn.

Noni Sao, who got up early as usual, saw him sitting comfortably, sucking honey, not in the least worried by the angry honeybees who buzzed around it in their vain attempt to chase it away. Their stings did not work because of the beast’s rough, thick coat. After having eaten the honey to its heart’s content, it ambled away into the thicket.

Apprehensive that the bear would come again, if not for honey, then for ripe jackfruit, Noni Sao got the tree felled the very next day.

But could a daughter of the house be felled like a tree?

Along with her brother, she also went to school, a fourteen-year-old whose body had just started getting laced with the nectar of youth. Their mother packed their tiffin early in the morning in two separate tiffin-boxes. Usually a simple fare of potato stuffed roti and mango pickle or plain rotis with some home-grown vegetables.

They were twins, but the boy was born half an hour before the girl, so he was considered older. He ate twice as much as this “younger” sister of his. The girl often laughed, though each time she did, she was chided by some elder or the other.

“He is a boy. A male body needs more energy. In fact, he eats less”, they would say.

Their mother never forgot to remind them each morning as they left for school, to keep the tiffin boxes hidden deep inside the school bags, almost buried in the books. “Animals have a very strong sense of smell. Attracted by food, they may attack”, she would say often. The other safety rule was to keep walking quietly if any animal was spotted, for animals did not do any harm unless teased or intimidated. And the third was to keep an eye on the river, especially in the rainy season, although the hutment was on higher ground and the river flowed much below it. Still, the angry waters of the Bagmati were not to be trusted. If they felt the water was rising, they should come back. The school was about two miles away. All the children went walking. They had no concept of any conveyance for such a short distance.

The previous night, it had rained. Trees and shrubs, grass and flowers all looked washed and lush green as if water, which was supposed to drain the colour away, had poured bucketsful of colour over them. The sun, in collaboration with the clouds, had a dappling effect on the road and trees. The magic of it all filled one with delight and a desire to dance. Intoxicated with the heady smell of wet earth, and first stirrings of youth in her, the girl absorbed the fragrances of nature and started whirling.

“Now what is this?” the brother chided her in angry tone. He was half an hour older, and their mother always said that by mere virtue of being the brother he, had the right and duty to keep an eye on her.

“Can’t you see I am dancing? Why don’t you join in too?” she retorted.

“I think you deserve a tight slap. It will set you right. We are getting late for school. We will miss out on practice for Independence Day celebrations.”

The girl chuckled as if to mock the brother. “Independence? What is meant by that?” she said but then fell in step with the brother on the moist dirt road that took them to school. The walk was always pleasant as the road was lined on either side with enormous trees with lush green canopies. The whole area was always green and colorful with wild flowers. Milk-men also used the path to reach the river bank from where they took boats to deliver milk to town folks. Their large metal containers clanged as they balanced them carefully on a bamboo pole across their shoulders. Some of them sang as they lumbered along, their melodious folk songs mingling with those of the happy birds hidden in the trees or flitting about. But these milkmen left before the school children and returned much after the school got over.

The only school in the locality, it boasted of two pucca rooms and a huge courtyard. The courtyard was dotted with dense trees whose shade provided some additional space for classes. There were lots of shrubs around which abounded with flowers. Peacocks strutted about; foxes stalked them with hopes to steal some eggs, while monkeys swung from one branch to the other. Bulbuls sang, pigeons cooed, mynah birds flew in flocks and the parrots screeched so raucously at times that the children who called out their tables aloud could not hear their own voice. Sixty to seventy children were enrolled, but the daily attendance was twenty to twenty-five on an average before the midday meal was served. During the meal it rose to about forty, but once the meal was over, it shrank back to the original or still lower. Of course, there were some regulars from the few houses where parents gave importance to education and kept vigil over their children’s attendance.

These days the number of children has gone up as they were practicing for Independence Day celebrations. Apart from fun, the incentive was the distribution of sweets after the flag hoisting and some toffees for those who took part in sports

and the singing of patriotic songs. Girls took part only in singing, so they were allowed to leave before the boys, who stayed back for sports.

“Go home”. The brother’s voice was imbued with authority as he was older by half an hour.

“What’s the harm if I stay till you finish?” she retorted.

“No, you better leave and help mother at home,” he repeated the order and went gamboling to where the P.T teacher was.

“Oh, how stubborn you are!” he remarked when he came back after an hour and saw her still sitting.

“Timid, not stubborn”, said she.

Actually a few girls who came to school left at where the road turned to right while this girl had to walk straight some distance. Previously she was not scared, but now for a few days she had been feeling a presence behind her. She had heard stories of leopards stalking their prey with patience that lasted for days. Then there were evil spirits. Women whose toes pointed backwards were spirits in the garb of humans. Mostly the spirits lived on trees, unseen, uncontrolled, pouncing upon unsuspecting victims. That was the reason she did not want to go home alone.

“Come on, get up now.” The brother had an edge to his voice.

Happily she gathered her bag and got up immediately. She was not scared when he was with her. They walked hand in hand. For some distance they had company but soon their ways parted. The two of them were left alone to cover the rest of the distance. Clouds were working their way up. A cool breeze swept across the jungle. The boy groped in his bag to feel the umbrella. It was there. Reassured, he continued walking but with a quicker pace to avoid the rains.

Suddenly the girl felt what she had been feeling for last couple of days. A presence. Yes, someone was there. She looked at the brother. He was walking carelessly, whistling.

While groping for the umbrella he had dropped the hand of his sister.

The grass whispered, the wind grew stronger. Behind the swaying trees she felt a shadow flitting across.

“Bhaiya, snake; there is a snake!” she alerted the brother.

“Nothing is there, you little fool. Walk faster. It is about to rain”, he chided her.

She felt someone breathing down her neck making her hair stand on end. “Bhaiya!” she wanted to shout with all her might but the voice got stuck in her throat; her whole being felt like lead. During this fateful moment the brother had moved a few more paces away. The girl, as though in a trance, turned as a reflex and the piercing scream that could escape her lips now, was also a reflex. But this was not a leopard that beats a hasty retreat because a girl has screamed. He tightened his hold on the girl, turned left, and disappeared in the dense cover of the lush green trees. But before doing that he had not forgotten to give a hard kick to the boy who had stopped short because of the screams of his sister. He fell face down while the girl wriggled in the arms of her tormenter like a small fish in the large beak of a stork.

In the midst of a clump of trees some entangled vines had made a kind of canopy under which the elephant had cleared the overgrown grass, and some of the long and twisted branches, creating a small niche. Sitting there with the bear and python he was eagerly waiting for the leopard who finally appeared with the girl on his shoulder. They screamed in delight.

All at once heavy droplets had started falling. The boy gathered his courage and, forgetting his aching bruises, ran like one possessed. He did not stop till he reached home shouting, “Leopard has taken her; leopard has taken her!”

People came out with whatever they could lay their hands on: bamboo pole, axe, scythe spade, anything. Sami, finding

some use for the rusted sword that hung from a peg in his hut and had been useless for ages, ran with it.

The python tightened his coils around the slender 14-year-old body of the girl. She quivered and found it difficult to breathe. Suddenly, as if by a miracle, she found her voice. Perhaps, the surprise had taken over the shock. "Aren't you Gajendra bhaiya's brother-in-law?" she mumbled.

The bear was baring his ugly teeth; his smile was obscene. "Yes, and now your brother will be our brother-in-law. Of all four of us", he said with glee and squeezed the girl as though she were a honeycomb. After a while when the leopard struck her with his paw, her slender neck slung to one side but he licked her up with his rough, greedy tongue. After all, she was all of fourteen, and the first charms of youth had started descending upon her.

The elephant trumpeted angrily, "You bastard, she is dead."

"She had to die. Didn't she know Gajendra bhaiya's brother-in-law?"

"But then what is left for me? I, too, had been stalking her for days and giving you her whereabouts."

"Dead or alive, what difference does it make? Isn't she a woman? Besides, a little life is still there. She seems to be breathing and the body is warm."

The elephant wrapped her around his trunk and tossed her like the thatched roof of Nati Panditain into the pit dug by brick makers and filled with water from the monsoon rain.

The search party found the bloated body after three days. A policeman asked the brother, "Are you sure you saw a leopard?"

"Not clearly. It was like a shadow flashing in front of my eyes. Then I fell face down just as I heard my sister screaming", replied the brother, sobbing.

"Doesn't seem to be the work of a leopard or any other animal."

They hauled out the body. "Apparently it's a man, or men, to be exact", commented one of the policeman.

“At least four to five”, their senior said.

After the due formalities the body was handed over to the kin and finally consigned to the flames. When the battered and now also decomposed girl yielded herself to the crackling, all-consuming fire, the inconsolable father threw himself on the wet earth and wept aloud. “Oh why had I warned her only of animals?”

—*Translated from Urdu by the Author*



Secular Wolves



“Aye haramzadi, offspring of beggars! How much longer will you linger on, making excuses about the child? Will your father come and wash the utensils for you?”

A perceptibly shaken Saroja patted the child gently, scrambled onto her feet and hurried inside. Three month old Mahesh had just fallen asleep. She could not fathom what troubled the child – whether he suffered from gripes or some other disorder. He had been restless all afternoon. Saroja had had to do all the work holding him in her arms. All the while, her mother-in-law sat comfortably, drawing on the hookah, cursing Saroja’s family because they had foisted such a slovenly, abusive, and slothful girl onto her family.

As she dashed into the house, Saroja glanced quickly at the child. He seemed composed. It was evening now. Inside the houses, the lamps had been lit, but everything outside was engulfed in the calm of a hushed darkness. In the verandah lay Saroja’s rope cot. A pregnant buffalo was tethered beside it. On the opposite side was a bamboo door.

Saroja entered into the kitchen, layered with the clean mud paste and gathered up the wicker basket laden with fresh bathwa plucked from the mud boundaries dividing the fields. Picking the leaves from their stems is a time consuming job; besides, the leaves require a thorough wash – else the little particles of mud that remain behind, leave a grimy taste in the mouth. Once, Saroja’s father-in-law had tossed out his

plate of food because it so happened that he chewed up a little mud residue. Saroja had to make the chapatis after putting the pot of herbs on the stove to cook – at least twenty-five chapatis. She also had to grind chutney of red chillies. If the child slept soundly, she would manage to do all this efficiently. That afternoon, she had had quite a rough time – The buffalo's fodder had to be prepared; the chapatis also had to be baked before the men left for the fields. Having picked the leaves from their stems, Saroja cast a sidelong look at her child once more as she went past to wash them at the hand pump outside. He was sleeping soundly – both his fists were closed – his tiny legs partially arched in the manner of little babies when they are fast asleep.

Having washed the bathwa leaves “Saroja implored silently on her way back to the kitchen: “Dear God! Let him sleep soundly for some more time.” Before she could get to the stove, a mysterious shadow-like creature lunged forward from behind the hand-pump. Its dark skin-tone blended so naturally with the dusk gathering around, that, had someone been there, he could only have sensed a movement; but not seen what it was that had moved in the dark. Abruptly, the buffalo stopped chewing its fodder; its tail too stopped moving – as though it had turned to stone. Precisely at the same time Saroja placed the basket laden with the dripping wet greens onto the floor and intuitively turned around, her maternal instinct having cautioned her, but by then the shadow had already vanished into the dark, as swiftly as lightening, hauling up the child between its jaws in a vice-like grip.

Saroja's reaction was very similar to that of the buffalo. She was transfixed-as though under some magical spell. Nevertheless in the flash of an instant, she let out an ear-piercing scream and ran in the direction of the movement: “Father of my little boy... my son...hai re daiya! My son....” By daybreak, the

entire village was agog with the buzz that the first-born son of Panchoo had been carried away by a she devil.

Probably she had devoured the child – bones and all, as though she had been munching on a tender laddoo. The villagers tired themselves out hunting all over the fields but there was no trace of the child's body. Only a talisman resembling the one he wore round his neck was found somewhere. However, even Panchoo was skeptical whether it was the same one as the one worn by his son because several people in the village wore similar talismans, provided sometimes by Maulvi Saheb or sometimes by Ram Sanahi Ojha. Both the men gave more or less a similar looking talismans. Whatever minimal difference there would have been was erased, because now, sullied in the mud and crushed by the animal's hooves, it had lost its identity.

Thereafter, during the next four months, three children from the village were picked, one after the other. Co-incidentally, they were all boys. People began to assume that the evil spirit was eyeing only boys. She did not want them to survive.

“Oh yes! No one can bring the girls to any harm. How they dance the jig upon our hearts! This third daughter of mine grows by the minute, even though she does not receive the full quota of milk. Despite contracting pneumonia she bounced back to health after some minimal amount of affliction”, said Saajapuri Chachi, who had got her name because her paternal home was in Shahjahanpur. She had been appointed the V. L. W. at the village and had been given strict instructions to ensure that the villagers do not discriminate between girls and boys.

Since Saajapur-wali was not a native resident of the village, she had been designated with a number of disparaging personality traits by the villagers. Some even credited her with having a black tongue. In one instance she cursed little girls, and in the other, the potter Bansi's six-year-old daughter was carried away.

Often, large kilns were lit in the precincts of the potters' residences in order to bake the mud vessels. Bansi had placed his cot out in the open at night, in order to ensure that the fires of the kilns were not put out. His family was very fond of their daughter because the six elder children were boys. The little girl was also very attached to her father. She awoke in the middle of the night, and began to insist upon going over to sleep with him. After a hard day's work, the mother was quite beleaguered with fatigue and slumber. She spanked the girl on her back and exclaimed: "Go out and die! Your father is outside, near the furnace." The girl was petite, giving the impression of being a couple of years younger than her age. Her complexion was sallow, reminiscent of the golden ears of ripened wheat. Rubbing her eyes drowsily, she went out in the open. It was pitch dark. However, the fire in the kiln could be seen from afar. A considerable distance away, en route to the kiln, several large, unbaked earthen pots were kept under a shed, waiting to be baked the next day. The fires in the kiln had been lit in order to bake these pots. Behind the pots a pair of eyes shone as brightly as the live coals of the fires in the kilns. The little girl shuddered just a little, near one of the pots. She tried to call out to her father - 'bapu' - but was scarcely able to articulate 'ba...' because her neck had already been seized in a vice-like grip. Her face lost its radiance and her bright eyes were soon as lacklustre as the darkness into which she had unwittingly stepped. Paradoxically, quite contented that her daughter was fast asleep with her arms around her father's neck near the kiln, the mother slept soundly through the rest of the night.

The little girl's half eaten body was recovered in the vicinity of the bamboo thicket. Most of the village dwellers believed that a churail dwelt in there.

About seven years ago, the village herdsman, Ram Babu's youthful, hale and hearty wife, Phoolmati, had been killed by

the co-sharers of their property and interred in the bamboo thicket. Ram Babu had been in possession of five bighas of fertile land and three cows of a good breed. The cows had been delivering calves quite regularly. However, Phoolmati had not as much as delivered a mouse, leave alone a baby, even after twelve years of marriage. Ram Babu was not very worried about this. He had resigned everything to God's will and was quite contented with looking after his land, his cows and his beautiful wife. His co-sharers too were quite pleased with the fact that Ram Babu did not have any issue. Conscious of her own limitation and apprehensive about the intent of the co-sharers, Phoolmati had insisted upon getting Ram Babu married with her younger sister. Eager to punish her for the crime she had committed, her co-sharers conspired with the Ojhas of the village, accused her of being a demoness, had her put to death and buried her in the bamboo thicket. A few days later, not only the co-sharers but also the rest of the village was abuzz with the rumour that Phoolmati was in fact, a demoness. Her sister had become pregnant soon after her death.

Ram Babu was impotent. The village vaid had pronounced this fact and it had been reiterated by the village Ojha. His first wife had slept with him for twelve years but nothing had happened. How then, could her younger sister, whom she had brought into her own house as a co-wife, conceive after her death? Either Ram Babu was not the father of the child or Phoolmati had impregnated herself into her sister's womb in order to avenge herself on her co-sharers. One day Phoolmati's ghost manifested itself upon one of the co-sharer's wife and informed that Ram Babu was so barren that he could not be expected to father even a clod. How could his second wife become pregnant? Obviously, it was Phoolmati who had permeated her sister's womb! Now it was out in the open for everyone to watch – she would be reborn and settle scores with each one of them.

The villagers hatched yet another conspiracy. After a great deal of persuasion they were able to inveigle Parvati to accompany them to the bamboo thicket. They had already slit a hefty bamboo so as to make a wide noose-like cleft in it. They forced the eighteen year old pregnant girl's slender neck into the opening and pressed the two halves of the bamboo so forcefully that her eyes bulged out and became the very picture of shock and consternation. They seemed to ask: "Why? Why?" In addition to the noose-like cleft they had made in the bamboo, they had also dug a pit in the thicket. Parvati was interred beside Phoolmati. By now, Ram Babu had, to some extent, lost his sanity. Instead of tending to his cows whose udders swelled up with milk, he kept making the rounds of the place where his two wives were buried. He began to hallucinate of songs being sung to the accompaniment of a flute; he also heard the sound of an infant's babble which sometimes questioned: "Why? Why? Why?" Nobody dared give his daughter in marriage to Ram Babu after this. His co-sharers warned all the community and the residents of the neighbouring villages that were anybody to marry his daughter with him, she would be killed by the churails or, contrarily, the churails would seek sanctuary in the girl's womb. Afterall, now there were two of them! It was they who had driven Ram Babu quite barmy.

Every time the wind blew across the bamboos, it seemed as though someone were wailing. Now even other people began to hear the sound of sad songs being sung in the vicinity of the bamboo thicket as dirges are sung during the month of Mohorram. Phoolmati would begin the song and Parvati would continue the strains from where her sister would trail off – exactly in the manner of Nauhas. Just then a papiha would tweet 'pi kahan' and the passersby in the environs of the bamboo thicket would shudder and scurry away. As time went by, people began to avoid the thicket. The womenfolk in particular never went past the thicket after dusk. And

now, it was from this very bamboo thicket that the half eaten body of potter Bansi's tiny, delicately built daughter had been recovered.

The churails had become rather too active.

The district administration had an entirely different view. So many children had disappeared that the news was splashed all over the newspapers and the television. The administration dispatched a team to the village, to conduct an investigation into the incidents. It included two huntsmen who had lived in regions which were inhabited by wolves. Nevertheless, when an investigation was conducted, it became apparent that in the past fifty years, no incident involving wolves had been reported from this village.

The oldest resident of the village Allah Diya informed that, when he was a young boy, the village was assailed by packs of wolves. They picked so many sheep, goats and hens that the farmers felt quite ruined. The wolves had not savored the taste of human blood but the loss of animal life had been so large that the administration had announced an award for anyone who would kill the wolves. During those days, the award settled by the officers for killing one wolf was forty rupees and that was believed to be quite a hefty sum of money. Allah Diya's Bade Chacha, Allah Rakha, had participated in the Second World War. Although he served in the Supply Section, he had been trained to shoot. He had retired by that time but was still quite robust and courageous. He shot four wolves and created a record.

"Four in one blow?" interrupted somebody. "No. One after the other; over a span of one or two months." He was awarded for each kill. During those days one could buy one tola of gold for eighty rupees. He used the prize money to purchase big earrings for Chachi to ornament her ears in her old age and had his pictures taken with his leg atop the carcasses of the wolves.

When he had killed the fourth wolf, the Deputy Commissioner Sahib shook his hand.

“Do you have those photographs with you?” asked one of the huntsmen.

“Let’s talk business, old man!” interrupted the leader of the team who was a class two officer in government service.

“One day, beside herself with anger, Chachi tore the pictures and threw them away.” He was about to launch into a detailed account elaborating the cause of the elderly Chachi’s annoyance, but he was stopped midway by a gesture signaling silence.

“Tell us when the wolves were seen again!”

“In nineteen forty seven, a wolf had ventured into the populated areas of the village. An alarm was raised but many people thought that a riot had broken out – afterall, the atmosphere was quite charged with communal tension. Later we learnt that it was a wolf. After this nothing was heard about them.”

A number of village dwellers had gathered by now. A middle-aged person spoke up with considerable bitterness: “After this, violence was unleashed against our community. At night when people raised an alarm, most of the others thought that a wolf was on the prowl. Meanwhile, the assailants conveniently massacred or thirty people and took off. At that time, one of my Chachis was a newlywed bride She jumped into the well.” Overwhelmed with emotion the middle-aged man became quiet.

“I think you people will not permit us to do our work. Get out of the way. Go home.” He spoke so crossly that the villagers felt intimidated – as though a wolf were growling in their midst.

Regaining control over his tone, he addressed an elderly person: “Yes, you tell us. Were wolves ever seen again in the populated parts of the village?”

“No, Saheb. It has been a long time now....during the period between nineteen forty-seven and nineteen-fifty, people killed

countless wolves in order to receive the prize-money of forty rupees. They flushed out the jungle. Were any wolves to have remained, they would certainly have fled for fear of the threat to their lives or continued to live in obscurity in the thick of the jungle. Once in a while the woodcutters have chanced to see a lone wolf or two, in the thick of the jungle but none has come this way.”

“Why should they come this way now?” Another person, unable to exercise control over himself, spoke up. He was a well-built man with a dark, tanned complexion. He wore an undersized dhoti and sported only a vest to cover the upper part of his body. He spoke in the Purbi dialect. His countenance wore a hardened look; his voice was expressive of ire. He put forth his point without much ado.

“There is only one thing I do not understand Chacha Allah Diya. All these boys that have disappeared belong to the quarters inhabited by the potters and the fishermen. Not a single boy has been abducted from the quarters inhabited by people belonging to your Muslim community. Even the goats that were picked belonged to an old woman who is a Brahmin. Do you have anything to say that can shed light on this phenomenon?”

“Son, I had never given a thought to this idea – that even a wolf...”

“Have you seen the wolf Chacha?” he interrupted.

“No, I have not seen the wolf, son, Bhaghirath. But evidently these are the doings of wolves. Aren’t they?”

“That is not the case. Answer my question. It is not yet apparent whether a wolf has killed the children or someone else has taken their lives.”

“What can I say that will answer your question appropriately? You have thought of something quite awful.”

“Why would you think like that?” Having said this he cast a sidelong look at Allah Diya, and smirked in such a

sinister way, that the elderly Allah Diya began to scratch his head awkwardly. Then he addressed the team: “You have conducted a close investigation into the matter. Somebody covered a distance of about six miles from the jungle and pilfered Dharmindar Mishra’s goat which was tethered to a stump. Now, don’t you see that only “our” animals are being picked? The following day, according to the buzz, lots of people were invited to a sumptuous feast at Manzoor Mian’s place. There was pulao. Mutton stew was prepared in a large vessel.”

“Now look here, you are talking about something quite different”, said one of the government employees. “We are not concerned with personal rivalries among the villagers, neither with thefts and burglaries, nor incidents of animal thefts. We are here to resolve the larger issue at hand – that of young children continually being killed in the village.”

“But there are no wolves and that is a fact”, said another man with a great deal of conviction.

“Maybe not wolves – it could have been a cheetah, a leopard, a hyena or any other wild animal. We need your co-operation to resolve the mystery.”

“Cheetahs and leopards do not inhabit these regions—we may presume that it is a wolf. But even the wolves have not been seen in the village, these fifty years.”

“Trees are being felled and the jungles are disappearing; the villages are gradually expanding into areas that were once a part of the jungle. The wasteland was never so big, was it?” said Asha, who ran the village Adult Education Center, and had universally been nick-named ‘nurse didi’ because she was a trained midwife. She was only too willing to offer her services if she were called to assist in the delivery of a baby.

Bhagirath glared at her and mumbled loudly enough for her to hear: “She is modestly lettered but the wretched woman fancies herself a pandita.” Asha felt quite intimidated

by Bhagirath. In fact even the elders of the village were in awe of him. The poor woman stood no chance. Quietly, she covered her head with the pallav of her sari and slunk away in the direction of the Center.

The hard slog of the next three or four days did not translate into anything positive. The huntsmen continued to scour the jungle, the villagers continued to be cross-questioned and the sites of the tragedies continued to be probed. However, Bhagirath's stark remark questioning the fact that not a single boy belonging to Allah Diya Chacha's community had been abducted began to spread like wild fire in parched grassland. People began to discuss this brand new implication with a great deal of enthusiasm.

One woman claimed that one night as she walked towards the Sarkanda bushes on her way to the fields after dark, a dark shadow had lunged forward from behind the bushes and disappeared. She swore that the shadow had pounced on two legs and was enclosed in a black sack-like overcoat.

"On the basis of Lajwanti behen's claim it is quite evident that it was a woman clad in a burka."

The story of the burka clad woman, who was kidnapping children, also began to do the rounds. From the potters' quarters, it traveled to the cobblers' settlements, then resting for a while with the Kayasthas of the village it passed through the orchards of the Thakurs to finally reach the mango groves of Brahmins and sat there comfortably.

Bhola Singh observed that earlier, he would not have perceived the incidents of the burka clad woman and the kidnappings as complimentary to one another, but of late, the situation was developing in such a way, that he too was obliged to put two and two together. That day it was getting dark by the time he returned from the meeting of the panchayat, regarding the boundary wall of the graveyard. It was night by the time he had walked past the local nullah. On the opposite

side of the nullah were the dwellings of the people belonging to the Muslim community. In the distance, coming from that direction, he heard the piercing sound of laughter. It was such a dreadful, and so ominous a laugh, that it could well have been a hyena's. His hair stood on end. Just then he recollected that the madcap Majeed would laugh in exactly the same manner. It must be him. Just then, he saw a burka clad woman dart out of the lane stealthily and disappear in the direction of the mud path that led towards the Thakurs' establishments. Underneath the head gear, her head moved from side to side, as though she were taking in the details of the surroundings despite being in a hurry. That night, the watchman, Ballabhdhar's, six-year-old son who was asleep under the thatch in the Thakur's fields was abducted from his rope cot. The father was a little distance away, relieving himself. He ran with all his might but by then a dark shadow had disappeared into the night. Armed with pick-axes and iron rods, a number of young men launched a search in several directions but the lost boy was not to be found.

Now, people passed by the Muslim quarters of the village, either looking suspiciously and gesturing among themselves, or murmuring softly while they stood and watched. The residents became anxious. Only a few days ago, the matter concerning the boundary wall of the graveyard had been resolved after much deliberation. With great difficulty, they had managed to prevent it from escalating into a serious controversy.

The eldest Thakurain of a Thakur household was seriously considering doing away with the services of Isa Bo, whom she had employed to clean the grain and perform other odd jobs. Overnight, she had become quite indifferent to her. However, none of the women in Isa Bo's household wore burkas. These were women who toiled for long hours under the sun weeding people's fields, or working on hire, exerting hard labour by means of the sickle. Only the women of wealthy households could afford to wear the burka. Isa Bo too heard the story of

the burka clad woman and was as frightened as anybody else. She began to sleep in the verandah, insisting that her daughter-in-law sleep inside, in the only room of the house, along with the two little grand-daughters. She also issued strict orders to her daughter-in-law to latch the room securely from within. Her son worked in a cloth manufacturing mill in Kanpur; Isa Mian had died several years ago. Isa Bo could not comprehend what had come over the genial Thakurain who always had a kind word for her and who often sent fruits and other goodies for her grand-daughters.

It was around this time that the armed huntsmen, who had been scouring the Sakhu jungle, shot a wolf, a healthy, dark brown, she wolf. They also picked up adolescent cubs from its hideout. The bones that they recovered were so worn out and broken down that it was difficult to make them out at a cursory glance. However, in all likelihood they were human bones, apparently of little children. These were gathered together in a bag, for forensic examination. The cubs were confined in a cage, in order to be sent to the zoo and the carcass of the female wolf was paraded in the village. People heaved sighs of relief.

The team that had been sent by the administration was given a grand send off. Nevertheless, quite a few people were still puzzled as to why not a single child had been lifted from the Muslim quarters of the village. Surely there was some mystery behind this. How could it be ascertained whether the wretched female wolf was actually carrying away the children; whether the bones recovered from its lair were in fact the bones of children and not of the young ones of rabbits, deer, sambhar or any other animal. How could one depend upon the government employees? They could make any claim in order to shut a file!

After about a week, the gardener, Mansa, came over to the Thakurain's place and informed her that on the previous night while returning home, he had seen a dark shadow on

the prowl. He was so frightened that he did not dare to look back; he took to his heels immediately and did not stop until he got to the buttress surrounding the well in the garden. Only there did he catch his breath.

Isa Bo was busy at work her head bowed low milling green gram in the stone chakki. She was quite hopeful that today, the Thakurain would certainly give her some of the crushed dal. Chapatis made from the crushed dal are good to taste. Besides, they can also be retained for longer in the tummy. However, the Thakurain emptied the powdered dal into the clay urn quite indifferently and tossed an instruction at Isa Bo: "Tomorrow when you prepare the silage for the cow, make sure you mix the powdered dal in it."

About two months went by. Neither was anybody's child killed and nor were anybody's sheep or goat stolen. The wolf seldom figured in the conversations of the people now. Many of them were convinced that the brown, female wolf had been killing the children. After all, she was an animal. In any case, even human beings do not hesitate to kill their own kind if and when the need arises. Hadn't Ram Babu's co-sharers done away with both his wives and an unborn child? Neither had anybody raised a voice against the crimes and nor had the police acted in order to bring the killers to book. Yet the entire village knew what had happened. Apart from that, when beautiful, young women are put to death so ruthlessly before biding their time, they are bound to take the shape of churails and demonesses and haunt the village. Everyone knew that too.

However, three months after the brown female wolf had been killed, the most appalling incident occurred.

Toilets were quite a rarity in the village. Women, especially, would go out to relieve themselves in the fields before daybreak. Quite often, they waited past midnight before they went out under the canopy of a starlit sky. Sukh Ram Pandit's newly wed

wife, who was suffering from an upset tummy, felt compelled to go out and relieve herself in the evening. At about twelve, midnight, when she suffered from bouts of pain once again, she did not wake up her husband out of sheer embarrassment. After all, she was not a child. She was a robust, able bodied, nineteen year old daughter of a farmer's household. She took off her anklets and her bangles so as to go out quietly, without waking up anybody. Gathering her dhoti around her and adjusting her nose ring, she set out to relieve herself behind the Sarkanda bushes. It was an eerily quiet night but a full moon hung low in the skies suffusing the sarkanda bushes with its magical light. Actually, it was the moonlight which prevented the girl from experiencing any fear. As usual, the young man awoke with the clatter of the wooden slippers. His wife was not by his side but he knew that she went out to the fields before daybreak. However, he was a little surprised to find her bangles and her anklets lying on the bed. When she did not return even after sunrise, people went out in search of her. They found the lota lying upside down in the Sarkanda bushes and the body of the girl lay a little distance away. A large portion of her thigh had been devoured.

This was the first incident of an adult's killing, on a moonlit night.

"The wolf had been killed. Now whose handiwork was this?"

"Surely there can be more wolves!"

"This place is not a hideout for wolves" said someone seething with anger. "..... The wolves never came back after nineteen forty-seven or forty-eight."

"This time too, the wolf has brought harm upon "us"."

"Yes, this is an issue that requires solemn deliberation. How much longer can we shut ourselves out from this matter?"

“We must respond with similar aggression - a tooth for a tooth, an eye for an eye. This is a grave failing on our part, that we Hindus suffer injustice and violence, ever so submissively – as though we were drinking mouthfuls of nectar – without so much as pausing to heave a sigh.”

“Ah! The waters are flowing well above the danger mark now. These government employees will do nothing. They have killed a hapless female wolf and packed off its poor little cubs to the zoo – to suffer life-imprisonment. Such severe injustice! Ram, Ram, Ram!”

All the village folk had gathered round the partially-eaten body of the young woman. Isa Bo was also hanging about in the vicinity. Shaking her head from side to side and settling her dupatta on it, she observed in quite a philosophical manner: “My mother would say, “whether he kills or not the wolf is always to be blamed.””

“This woman’s neck should be measured at the earliest. Last year, during the Ram Naumi procession, her son stood in our midst, holding a glass of jaggery sherbet. He puts on a charade of friendship and wields the knife on the quiet. Every evening, I go to the village chaupal to read the newspaper. These days, our village is making news. It is alleged that undercover agents belonging to the secret agency of the neighbouring country are roaming about in our midst. It is due to protection from people such as these that they find easy passage. How else would it be possible for them to find their way in?”

Once again, Isa Bo could not understand what had transpired among the people – words like neighbouring country and secret agency were beyond her comprehension. After all, she was both slow in the uptake and a little hard of hearing. She stood there in a daze for a while, then wobbled away to do her work. Nevertheless, she felt uncomfortable. She had not grasped the full meaning of their words but there was something sinister

in their attitude that language could not articulate – and Isa Bo could not appreciate that.

However, before the scheme to slit open Isa Bo's throat could be hatched, something bizarre happened. This time two children were lifted within a span of twenty-four hours from the Muslim quarters of the village.

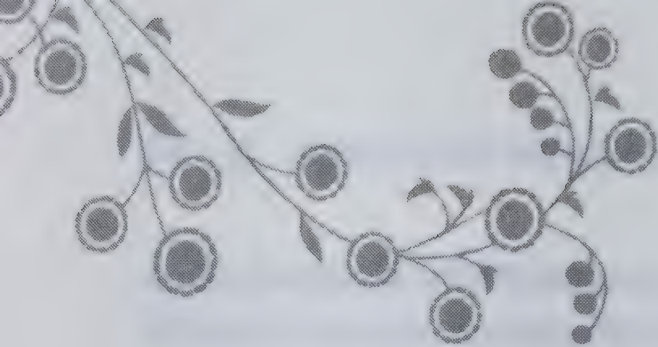
One evening, having cut the grass, Abdul's seven or eight year old daughter was on her way back home, accompanied by her mother and the other women. Abdul earned his livelihood by picking mahua during the summer and plucking water-chestnuts from the ponds during the winter months. That day, Abdul's daughter was running a slight temperature which had risen by the evening. She was trailing behind her mother and continually being reprimanded for lagging behind. It was getting dark and a chill wind began to blow. All of a sudden, when they neared the mango grove, the girl was hauled up from the back. For the reason that the women turned around and created a din, the animal let go of the girl and darted off. Nevertheless, due to the vice-like grip around her neck, and probably due to the severity of shock, she had died by then.

The next day Muhktaran bibi was attacked during the day in a most baffling manner. She was walking down the thoroughfare carrying her child on the waist and a basket over her head. Despite the atmosphere of fear that assailed the villagers, life seemed to be moving at its own pace (besides, fear had become quite ubiquitous by now!). It was daytime; gathering up the livestock droppings for preparing fuel while walking down the mud path, she had wandered off towards the bamboo thicket. All of a sudden, a full-grown, healthy, wolf pounced upon her from behind the bush, grabbed the child in the batting of an eyelid and disappeared into the thicket as fast as lightening. Owing to the attack, Mukhtaran bibi suffered deep gashes on her arms and around her ribs.

By the evening they were able to recover half-eaten remains of the child's body, a couple of kilometers away, from the wasteland. This was the first time somebody had actually seen the assailant in broad daylight and identified it. It was a wolf all right. Whether it was male or female could not be discerned in the flash of the instant – but there was no doubt that it was an incredibly secular wolf.

In fact, not just that one – all wolves are secular. They do not kill on account of religious convictions.





Death of a Field Mouse



Perhaps it was the fourth time that Mishir ji had come.

“Hey you, tell me frankly if you are coming. I will enter your name in the register. Otherwise, say a categorical ‘no’. And remember this is the last time I am asking you. I shall not come again, so stop riding your high horse. We are leaving the day after tomorrow.”

Dhena bared his yellow teeth and started scratching his head. It was time to harvest the wheat crop. Many a field had already been harvested. Young boys of the Musahar and Chamar communities were seen gleaning the fallen wheat heads. Today Pheku had collected a basketful of these. They would surely yield about half a kilogram of wheat. He was very happy. If only he could get some more of the valuable grain! He did not remember when the family had last eaten rotis to their heart’s content. A few days ago they had been able to catch a large rabbit which filled their cooking pot, but lady luck did not always smile like this. Sometimes it was difficult to lay hands even on mice. The two boys eat as though possessed by evil spirits. Amma is old but she eats like anyone else. In fact, age has made her all the greedier. One day she demanded some oil. How can one have oil and condiments when there was hardly enough money to buy salt? They had to subsist on the boiled snails or mice roasted on the kindle that was gathered from the woods. It was only his wife who never complained. With a face as expressionless as a rock, she roamed around

foraging for something that would douse the fire that blazed in their stomachs all the time.

“You will get eight rupees and sherbet to drink. Also puris with vegetable curry to eat”, Mishir ji had offered.

Dhena imagined a well laid out meal. Puris with vegetable curry and sweet, cool sherbet to drink! These tempting images danced in front of his eyes whenever Mishir ji came visiting. But Dhena was scared of big cities, so scared that he was ready to give up even the manna-like food. He had heard many stories about city life: the roads are so wide one gets out of breath while crossing it; and the street lights, they are as bright as lightning in the sky during a thunder storm; mammoth vehicles keep running non-stop and so on. “How do people live in such terrifying places?” Dhena often wondered. “Why don’t they die out of sheer fright?”

“How come, people inhabit such places, these sub-human creatures?” Once, a woman had asked the same question about Dhena’s village, albeit for a different reason. That was the occasion when a team from Punjab Agriculture Institute, conducting research on rodents and related small animals, had drifted into Dhena’s interior, god-forsaken village. The ten-member team included two girls. Two girls in the midst of eight boys! With heads uncovered and eyes bereft of all shame they seemed like whores to him. Dhena ogled at them with his mouth wide open in wonderment. Dark, almost naked village urchins, along with a few youth in tow, had followed their jeep. They hardly ever got the chance to witness such curious scenes in their dull, uneventful lives. Like Dhena’s, their mouths too were wide open with stupidity writ large on their faces!

“What remote places these villages are and how desolate! I am feeling suffocated, as if in a cage.” commented the woman again. Dhena thought she must be somewhat demented. For one, she was wearing trousers like a man and her hair was also short. On top of this, she was talking a lot of nonsense. There

was this vast expanse of land with an open clear firmament overhead – and this female had reasons for feeling suffocated! What strange people inhabit this earth! Their bellies are full, their bodies are well clad. Where do they come from and how do they manage to live in the midst of plenty? Who gives them so much of everything? Trying to find answers to these questions, Dhena's head reeled.

According to the findings of the research team, the population of rats and mice was surprisingly low in this area, even though their labyrinthine holes abounded.

"Why are these people talking so much about rats? Do they also eat them?" thought Dhena.

Mustering all his courage he came forward and asked this question: "Sir, tell us some methods of increasing the number of rats."

"Rats eat up millions of tons of food grains in our country and here is this man asking for ways of multiplying them!"

"Sir, he eats rats; they are food for him," quipped someone from the crowd.

"Why, everyone in my hamlet eats them", said Dhena very simply.

"A simple and easy way of controlling rodents is to eat them up." Dr. Nafees, who was heading the team, could not help laughing, though he usually kept a straight face and hardly ever laughed. The government is spending enormous sums of money funding research projects and researchers are bending over backwards working out ways to bring the number of rats down, but hoodwinking them all, consuming every poison, inhaling every poisonous gas, they are nevertheless still thriving."

"Yes, just like human beings who, in spite of subsisting on rats and mice, are still living."

"Hey! Why are you people harping on eating rats?" This time the woman spat noisily. She was feeling nauseated.

“How crazy she is”, thought Dhena. “If you could catch ten, fifteen plump mice and roughly the same number of large snails, the entire family would be able to manage at least one meal. But, puris with vegetable curry!”

Dhena’s son, Pheku, was a good ten-year-old, but he had never eaten puris. Why, he has never even seen them. And sherbet! That too was an unknown luxury. He usually roamed around half-naked and just two years previously he used to go around stark naked. It was no longer than that that he had started tying a length of cloth around his waist. During the wedding of the daughter of the village head, the boy’s mother had gone to clean the grains. She had chopped about eighty kilograms of jackfruit all by herself. With household chores like this, she had worked hard for three consecutive days. In return she was given two square meals daily and a large piece of coarse cloth, usually used as a wrap around. She tore it in four and gave one piece to the boy. A bellyful of meals twice a day for three days at a stretch! Upon returning, when she told the family about the goodies she had eaten there, they looked at her with eyes that shone with greed and wonderment. Like a knife, jealousy stabbed Dhena’s heart. The village head had called only his wife. Dhena and his son were left out. If he had gone he would have stuffed himself with so much food that hunger would not have bothered him for some time. His wife told them that during the feast five sacksful of rice were cooked for each meal. The store was still piled with sacks of grain. Rats played merry hell upon them.

“We should keep a tomcat”, the fat cook had suggested.

“Come off it, when it comes to catching rats no one can compete with Dhena Musahar, not even a tomcat! He’s the one who should be called instead,” said the boy who worked as helper to the cook. All of them burst out laughing. That laugh rang simultaneously with repulsion, contempt and derision!

Man, called the crown of creation, has spared nothing from being eaten: rats, moles, snakes, dogs, goats, sheep, pigs, cows, camels, horses, all kind of birds... You name it, and it is there at their table.

And the best part of the story is that those who eat mutton look down upon those who eat beef, while those who gobble up the beef with great relish hate those who eat pork. So much so that for them, “pig eater” is an abusive term. Right now the one who was poking fun at Dhena was a tribal youth who ate cows and pigs both with equal gusto. He often teased Dhena, “Hey you, eating rats of all things! Ugh!”

How easy it is to hate people, to put them on inferior planks, to adopt a condescending attitude toward them just because they eat differently. Would Dhena like to eat rats if he got puris and some curry to go with them? Actually, for him they would be luxury. Plain rotis and chutney would do just as well. Plain boiled rice with some salt and a roasted chili would also suffice. Just salt and some mustard oil too, are good accompaniments. As simple as that! He would say “yes” to Mishir ji if he came again.

When Dhena gave a nod finally, Mishir ji provided him with coarse slippers which had rubber soles. He had to cover quite a few miles walking and the track was quite rough. If his feet got blistered, or pricked by thorns, he would refuse to follow. Along with the footwear, Mishir ji handed him over the party flag, too. Dhena put the flag aside nonchalantly, but picked up the slippers, examining them keenly by turning them this way and that. In fact, he kept them on his hands for quite some time. That sacred object, which had come so easily to him out of the blue, was worth putting on the head if one really wanted to show respect. But his feet protested when he finally put them on. Calloused, cracked, dry and black like the floor of a dried up old pond, they were not used to any protection. Perhaps the slippers were first of a series of rewards to be showered upon

him for coming with Mishir ji to join the procession. They overshadowed his fear of a big city. Thirty year old Dhena placed the footwear on his head and, dancing like a child, ran home to show them off to his woman and children.

“Hey, you! Pick up the flag.” Mishir ji shouted after him.

They were many. Like rats driven out of their holes, they made a good half-mile long procession. Each one of them held a flag in his hand. All of them were given sherbet to drink and made to practice slogan shouting, invoking victory to revolution. After every twenty to twenty five people, there was a party worker who raised the slogan ‘inquilab’ and they answered by responding to the full capacity of their lungs ‘zindabad’. Most of them did not know what was meant by inquilab. Was it a meal of puris with curry, sherbet or else just a plump, juicy mouse?

Hunger was giving hard kicks to Dhena’s stomach. He was wondering as to when he was going to get some food. At times he became silent and at times shouted Jindabad even without hearing inquilab from his leader. His voice became feeble and his feet, not accustomed to footwear, felt heavy. He wanted to take the slippers off but the road with its tar coating was very hot; it would have burnt his soles. The dirt roads of his village, lined with babool trees, never felt so forbidding. Many a time he drifted away from his line but was quickly pulled in by the group leader. Suddenly there was some commotion in the front rows of the procession. Sharp voices were heard in the distance. Craning his neck this way and that Dhena tried to make out what was happening. Some baton wielding cops were trying to stop the procession from breaking the barricade which was put up at a certain point by stretching a rope across the road. Seeing the cops, a terrified Dhena froze. Police frightened him no end. For him they were representatives of Yama, the god of death. They were from out of this world. Surrounded by a halo of unlimited powers, their very presence was foreboding;

it heralded destruction. Dear God! Had he known, he would not have come. He looked around for succor, but found himself in the midst of unknown faces. There were about twenty to twenty five people from his area, but perhaps they had got mixed up with others. Commotion in the front rows increased. The place which the police did not allow to go beyond was actually a T - point where another procession had come from the opposite direction to join these people. Both processions stopped short but the slogan shouting went up. Dhena scratched his head and like a fool stared at others with blank eyes. Lots of people were not as inexperienced as he. They had been carted like this on some previous occasions, too. Sometimes they were loaded in jeeps and taken to polling booths to cast their votes. Like donkeys who carry bagsful of earth on their backs, these voters carried their leaders to position and power. But Dhena himself was a clod of earth, an insect from a jungle, a mouse driven out of his hole.

The leaders had already instructed the people in the procession to hold their ground firmly. "Never mind the use of batons. We will not allow the police to go beyond that. Rest assured we will see to it that they do not open fire. As for the use of batons, and bursting of tear gas shells, they will only serve our purpose. How, otherwise, will the newspaper report it and the general public be aware of our agitation?"

The police did use the batons, causing a stampede in the front rows. Like ripples in turbulent waters, the stampede percolated down to the rear. Hunger, thirst, heat and, above all, the presence of cops had already made Dhena lose his nerve. The promised money, eight rupees too, did not offer any succor. The faces of his wife and the two boys floated in front of his eyes. He thought of his mother's naked, shriveled up, sagging breasts and his father's dark, wrinkled, perpetually worried countenance. Of his village with all that was so familiar: thorny shrubs of babool, parched earth with cracks, goats grazing

on the knoll, whirlwinds raising dust, wheat heads scattered here and there in the fields that looked desolate after the crops had been harvested. The wheat heads which his wife and boys had gleaned would yield about a kilo or more of wheat which will be milled at home. His wife would bake rotis out of the flour thus obtained. A strong desire to hide his face in the lap of his dour-faced wife rose in his heart. Also he wanted to run away from this place and go to the one where he did not own any thing and yet had a strong sense of belonging to everything. Just then the crowd surged, causing great pressure to the middle and rear. Like a crazed animal Dhena, ran for his life. Since he had lost his wits he did not realize that running like this he may lose his way, making it difficult to go back to his village without Mishir ji's help. He had neither money nor any common sense to deal with any such crisis. Running directionless like an unharnessed camel, Dhena had hardly gone a hundred yards when he was run over by a police jeep coming from the opposite direction.

After a short while the procession regained order, it rallied again. The stampede was not a major one. The news of a man being killed on the road took some time to trickle down to people. And still it was not clear whether the deceased was one from the procession or just an ordinary passerby. The people whom Mishir ji had brought from the Musahar toil of Satpedwa village were put under the charge of one of the party workers. He was made responsible for their safe return to the village. He did not consider it necessary to reckon whether there was one man less or Mishir ji had given him eight rupees extra by mistake. He pocketed the money and helped his charges board the bus. Someone from Dhena's neighbourhood noticed his absence but he was told that there were many buses going towards his village; he would board any one of them.

Dhena kept lying in a Government morgue for three days. When no one came to claim or identify the body, sixty rupees were released from the government fund for his cremation. After the postmortem, he was put in a large body bag of coarse cloth, bearing an official stamp. Now he was handed over to Sarju the sweeper along with sixty rupees for his last rites.

“Bastards! They must be cremating their mothers in sixty rupees. Don’t they know how the firewood is selling? Sure they do, but they think I have pots of money from which I will spend on cremating these unclaimed bodies.” A grumbling Sarju loaded the body on a hand cart and wheeled it to the bridge on Gomti River. He dragged the body and banged it mercilessly on the floor. He then pulled the body bag off. It was about two and a half meters long and also wide enough to make an average multipurpose sheet after being ripped open. Previously, it sold for ten rupees but will now not fetch less than fifteen. “Come on, man, go into the lap of Ma Gomti. May God bless you!” With these words of farewell, Sarju made the body stand erect, and threw it over the bridge.

Sarju, the sweeper, was now getting old. He had to wheel the cart, loaded with a body, heavy in death, up to the bridge. So the push was not hard enough. Perhaps the angle of throw was not right either. The body could not go straight into the waters; it got stuck into the crisscross girders of the bridge. Grabbing the ‘sheet’ and putting the money in his pocket Sarju headed for the shop that sold country liquor.

The next day some milkmen, who crossed the bridge at the first streak of dawn, spotted the body dangling from the girders. Then it was some morning walkers who noticed it and after them some casual passersby. A small crowd gathered.

“Murders every day; wanton killings galore! Where is our society heading?” someone asked.

“Oh, just one body and you are bothered so much! You should go to Punjab”, came another piece of advice.

“Punjab is quite far. What about U. P., your own province? Such peace abounds there. It is washed in milk.” The tone had undisguised sarcasm.

The man standing next gave a hard look to someone who mentioned Bihar. He slunk away quietly. “These Biharis! They abound everywhere! Even in such a small gathering one turned out to be from Bihar”, he mused.

A man who had just arrived had his own ideas. “Poor thing must have died in police custody!”

Getting a whiff of some incident, two news reporters appeared on the scene. One whipped out a notebook from his pocket; the other burst out laughing.

“You will never understand the news value of an incident. Leave this for some rag of a vernacular paper to publish with a sensational headline. In Punjab, the terrorists killed thirty to forty people a day and the news got only a corner in the papers which enjoy a national status. Nowadays, nobody is bothered unless the deaths are not less than a thousand or so.”

A couple of people had an extra sense of duty. While going back they informed the constable on duty in a nearby place about the body. Wielding his baton he came to the bridge and gave an intent look to the dangling corpse.

“Come off it. It is not murder! It is the official ‘disposal’ of an unclaimed body. See for yourself, just see!” He beckoned a few decent looking people to come closer and intimidated the riff raff with his baton, signaling them to stay away. Then, using his staff, he upturned the body. It had started decomposing. A long incision running from chest to abdomen could clearly be seen now. It was indicative of a postmortem. The stitches were done untidily by a thick, coarse thread. A folded paper was dangling from his neck like a pendant. It was inscribed with some details by the medical and police officers.

People turned away and the crowd dispersed. The constable gave a hard push to the body with his baton. It fell in the water with a splash and disappeared for a short while only to come again to the surface, floating. The vultures that were perched on the trees lining the river exchanged meaningful glances with each other and flapped their wings. The policeman spat noisily and wiped his mouth on his sleeve, muttering under his breath; “Imagine, sighting a stinking body first thing in the morning!”

Postscript: Far away, in a god-forsaken village, some people were waiting in vain for a loved one who had gone to fetch eight rupees and, perhaps, some left-over puris, while others were busy demolishing prayer houses and slitting people’s throats because they wanted to bring God’s own rule into the country.



Baksa



For Ammi a box was always baksa.

When the children were young and school going, once Bade Bhaiya corrected her, “Pray what is this baksa? Why can’t you say box like we do?”

“What difference would it make if I call it baksa? Ok, *bakas*. Now happy?” was Ammi’s reply.

The children were really aghast and the two girls said in unison, “Oh Ammi, it’s alright, you call it baksa. *Bakas* is all the more...” They left the sentence trailing. Perhaps they wanted to say that *bakas* was more awkward, less refined, making Ammi sound like a country bumpkin, folksy and so on but they stopped short. Some forty to forty-five years ago children were not as free with their parents as to sound rude. A thin veneer of respect still prevailed.

Ammi started laughing. “Come on, I only know baksa. What I said was in jest. I can’t open my mouth wide and then roll the tongue to say bau...ox like you do. No way.”

Sitting around the fireplace in a pleasantly cold winter month, shelling and eating peanuts, waiting for the sweet potatoes to roast in the hot embers, all of them giggled together cheerfully. “Say it again, Ammi, say bau...oks. Let us see how you do that.”

And today they were sitting around Ammi’s baksa like, once upon a time, they sat in the kitchen on low wooden stools waiting for the thin, hot, chapatis to fall on their individual

plates with a thud. It was usually Bhaiya, who would separate the two layers of the chapatti, holding the thinner one close to his eyes in an effort to know whether he could see through. Some other child would also follow suit, making Ammi's patience run thin. "Stop that! Are you eating or playing the fool? Hurry, let me finish with the kitchen", she would chide them.

Abba ran a shop of readymade garments. Usually he came late for his lunch. After feeding the children, Ammi waited for him. She helped him wash his hands after he arrived and served him the meal. She stood in attendance while he ate and again helped by pouring water and offering a towel after he had finished. Ritual over, she cleared the broad, low table on which the food was served and handed him a toothpick. Her own meal came last. More often than not it was almost four o'clock. The lateness of her lunch hampered her dinner as according to her "Can't eat, the meal from earlier is still sitting in my throat."

Coming from all four directions, traversing long distances, all of Ammi's five children were sitting together. Once again, Badi Aapa had opened the box. It was a large trunk the lid of which turned on hinges of brass. It came with Ammi at the time of her wedding, carrying her clothes and linen as part of her wedding gifts. At the moment it was the only thing, which could be called hers exclusively. The rest of the things she owned were given away, including her existence.

The box looked mysterious. Perhaps the passage of time had played a trick. It seemed to have sprung up from the tales of Scheherazade's 'Thousand and One Nights'. A lover of antiques could have offered a good price for it. One wonders why things become more valuable when they get old.

"Come on, sit here; all four of you. I don't want any of you cribbing later", said Badi Aapa.

"Why should anyone have anything to crib about?" quipped the younger brother; there was an edge in his voice.

“These days nobody can be sure about anyone or anything. Then your wives also have not taken the trouble to come. So the presence of you two brothers is imperative”, was Badi Aapa’s reply.

The middle sister supported her. “Yes, what Badi Aapa says is right.”

Badi Aapa blinked her large, tear-filled eyes, said bismillah and opened the box. The first layer of clothes was removed and kept aside. These were six sets of daily wear shalwar suits, slightly faded and worn out with regular use. In between there were neatly folded white dupattas. Ammi had given up wearing colored dupattas after Abba’s death though she did not mind wearing light colors for other clothes. Since her dupattas were not dyed any more, they were not starched, or crinkled either. Now they were like chadars, plain and simple, and coarse.

Another layer of clothes emerged from underneath. They were new, given to her by a visiting daughter or son. Badi Aapa recognized two of them. They had come as customary gifts from the in-laws of the two sons at the time of their wedding. They were somewhat expensive. Ammi had not touched them. Whenever the children came to visit they insisted that Ammi get them stitched and put them to good use. She always declined the suggestion although now there was no need to save, to pinch pennies.

“I don’t think I need anything anymore”, she would answer simply on such occasions but her voice would betray a deep anguish, which would stay for some time in the air around and tug at the heart.

Aapa dived into the box once again, coming up with Ammi’s bangle box. Wrapped carefully in a length of old, worn-out cloth it was fitted in a corner. For a bangle box it was quite large and loaded with all kinds of glass bangles, in neat rows.

Glass bangles were Ammi’s only adornment. Perhaps the only expenditure which she allowed herself apart from two

square meals and two sets of clothes a year. From her waking hours she, once in a while, stole a little time for herself. This she spent in dyeing dupattas of fine muslin, in colors to match her clothes. They were starched with rice water to which mica dust was added for glitter. Crinkling gave them the final touch after which they were twisted in rounds and stored in the box for use. The ritual was repeated, on an average, once in a month. Her bangles matched the colors of these dupattas. Surprisingly the delicate glass bangles did not break inspite of daily household chores which, apart from other heavy duty work, included pounding the spices to make the pickles in season. In fact, she did not use the word 'breaking' for these bangles as it was inauspicious for a woman, whose husband was alive, to say so. Bangles signified a woman's good fortune that she was with her husband.

The box had suddenly disappeared after Abba's death. By then, all three daughters were married off. Busy with families of their own, they did not notice its absence. Their visits to their parental home now were few and far between. Today they knew where it had gone to. Aapa touched it ruefully then opened the lid. The shimmering bangles lit up the entire room. It was the light of a woman's suhag, her husband's life and well-being; it was the light of the agonizingly hazardous work of the glass workers of Firozabad. Aapa swallowed the lump that had formed in her throat.

"Oh come on Aapa, hurry up! What are you staring at?" the younger brother said impatiently.

Aapa threw an angry glance in his direction and picked up the three books that had surfaced. One was 'Razia Ka Shahi Dasterkhwan'[Razia's book of royal recipes], the second 'Gharelu Nuskhe'[home remedies for common ailments] and third was a book of select prayers from the Holy Quran. On special occasions the recipes were tried from that 'royal' collection. People, coming for bride viewing, when the girls were

unmarried, and sons-in-law coming after they had been married, were among such special occasions. With great effort, Ammi saved money to splurge on them. She did all the housework herself, had food grains purchased in bulk during the harvesting season, and stitched most of the clothes at home. When she fell ill, she took out the book of home remedies. No one went to a doctor unless the ailment did not respond to her concoctions. More often than not they really worked. Once Bhaiya said in jest, “During Ammi’s time, diseases and children, both were easy to handle. Now ailments do not relent without antibiotics and children without a mobile or laptop.”

Ammi’s means of handling the problems, whether physical or otherwise, included her prayer book, too. It was kept in a satin sachet which was embroidered in golden zari work which Ammi had embroidered herself. When she was young, even girls from affluent families were taught all the household work—including sewing and embroidery. People always worried about their future. “Who knows what sort of husband and family they are going to land up with”. Well, future husband and in-laws are still the cause of worry for the parents of unmarried girls whether they have learnt any housework or not.

After four days of Ammi’s wedding her brother came to take her home for the short customary visit, which was part of wedding ceremonies. He was shocked to see her matrimonial home, which was much below their standard. “I wonder what our father saw in this family. At home we tether our cattle in such houses.” His voice betrayed deep anguish as well as anger. Ammi, who was still in her bridal attire, put her hennaed hand firmly on his mouth. Pressing it hard she said, “Don’t you dare say a word about it to our father. May you see me dead if you do!”

“That bugger Waseem!” the brother muttered with more indignation.

“He is your first cousin and older than you. Don’t you dare be so rude to him.” He was chastised once again. Ammi’s parents never came to know about their daughter’s plight, financial or otherwise, as the brother, realizing the firmness in Ammi’s voice, had sewn up his lips.

When Ammi was 15 years old, she was betrothed to her first cousin, Waseem, who at that time was studying in Aligarh. He fell in love with a classmate of his and forced the parents to break the engagement. He convinced his parents saying that it would be disastrous for everyone involved.

Ammi’s distraught father quietly and quickly, found a ‘suitable’ boy in another town and married her off during the stipulated time. Everyone heaved a sigh of relief. Waseem’s parents included.

Abba was definitely ‘suitable’ in the sense that he had no bad habits, was somewhat educated and, above all, from the same caste. But he was not doing well in business and was short tempered. Many a times he flung his plate of food because the food was not as he wanted it to be. Once, in one such fit of rage, he threw away Ammi’s prayer book. Ammi was appalled, as it was blasphemy, also a bad omen. She prayed fervently, imploring Allah to forgive the sacrilege. Aapa, who was a young girl at that time, witnessed the scene. Memories came flooding back and tears rolled down her cheeks. Caressing the prayer book with affection and reverence, she touched it to her forehead and kept it aside.

Now the middle sister peered into the box. “What is this ... that green something?” she mumbled as if to herself.

It was a beautiful sachet of green silk which had lost some of its luster with the passage of time. Aapa tipped it over. Along with a small box of silver, some currency notes and coins came rolling out. The money added up to five hundred and eighty rupees and the silver box yielded three small gold ornaments. They were remnants of the loads of jewellery which Ammi had

brought as her parents' wedding gift. Most of it was sold out to give good education to her children, especially the sons. The rest was given to the daughters at the time of their weddings. These three pieces remained. Maybe they had some special sentimental value or were too small to be given to anyone.

"Isn't it over, Aapa?" the brother got impatient again.

A little was still left. Aapa picked up a couple of hand fans made of reeds and bits of colourful cloth. They were reminders of the days when their house did not have electricity. During the hot summer months, when the children were restless at night, Ammi comforted them with these fans. In between, she directed the air towards Abba too. Next morning she resorted to her usual household duties with sleep-laden eyes.

There was an old, worn out prayer mat, too. With constant use it had become threadbare. Also a few embroidered table covers, some of which were left incomplete. Some green cardamoms and cloves were strewn in between either for fragrance or to keep the insects at bay. Now the bottom of the box was visible. Aapa was surprised by the presence of some old papers which had gone yellow with age. Apparently they were torn out from copy books of the children when they had just begun their first lessons in school. They were full of their dirty, crawly handwriting and very simple sums. Also admit cards of their first board exams. They were memories of years that had gone by, so close to Ammi's heart.

With heavy hearts they all got up. Only Aapa kept sitting. "If anyone of you wants to keep something as a keepsake, please pick it up now, or I will send her clothes and things, including the money, to the girls' orphanage." Aapa said quietly. No one responded.

The last item was a lightweight quilt. It was made of two layers of fine silk, padded with a thin layer of cotton. The edges were trimmed with narrow strips of golden ribbons called dhanak. During light winters Ammi wrapped it around and

went about her household chores. The vibrant colors and gold trimmings made her fair complexion glow. The quilt was well past its prime but Ammi had still kept it; perhaps it served as lining to her “bakas”. Aapa took it out and gave a vigorous shake. Dry neem leaves, kept to ward off silver fish and other insects, flew about like confetti. Along with them a photograph, too, floated down. Yellow, and faded with age, it was the photo of a young man who had a striking resemblance to Ammi. Such resemblance was not uncommon between first cousins. And though the writing, too, had faded with time, the inscription at the back could be read easily. It was his name – Waseem.



A Handful of Weeds



The desolate, sleepy railway station could not be awakened even by the sharp whistle of the mammoth engine that pulled the train in. Three passengers were sitting on the only worn-out wooden bench under the shed. One was a bleary eyed old man and the other a newly married young teenage girl whose wrists were adorned with bright red glass bangles, and the third was a middle-aged man with bent shoulders, who seemed to be the girl's companion. One could not discern, though, whether he was her husband or some elderly relative from her in-law's house. Another person who stood by the bench looking expectantly at these people was the only available coolie there.

Nafeesa quickly woke up Ayaz who was still fast asleep. Without waiting for any help from him she pulled out their small suitcase and wicker basket from under the berth. The coolie was collecting the luggage of the newly married girl...a colourful bamboo basket which must have contained goodies from her parents, a tin trunk that was painted in bright red and green floral patterns, and a huge holdall. For a brief moment the girl lifted her veil a little with her hennaed fingers and looked at Nafeesa, who was getting down with Ayaz in tow. Their eyes met and the nano second passed. Nafeesa would never meet this girl again. She did not know who she was and where she was going, whether she was happy or not so happy. There are so many faces one comes across at railway stations. They go their own way, fade away in the mist of time. When Nafeesa

had come to board the train she had seen an old man coming down the staircase. His wrinkled face was almost wet with tears. He had certainly come to see some loved one off. Nafeesa felt a lump forming in her throat. God only knew whom he was being separated from. Everyone has so many problems of their own that there seems no time for others. Badi Amma had written, "I can hardly claim any right over you, yet I am asking you to come over. I really long to see you, your children. There isn't much time left for me, come if you can, bring your children along. Husband, too, if he does not mind. I want to be with people who are my only family."

It took two full weeks for her to be able to stir out of the house. Ayaz's quarterly exams were on. Nafeesa had to complete a course of injections for the intermittent fever she had had for some time. "Better not leave before completing the course", her husband had advised.

"Mummy, would you like to sit in the retiring room till the dawn breaks or push off right away? It is still dark, you know", Ayaz was asking. The train was leaving the station. The loud clang of rolling wheels drowned his voice and as it blew its sharp whistle Nafeesa's heart was stabbed by a curious sadness.

Ages ago, Badi Amma, a young teenage girl, had left for her marital home from this very station. Very much like the newly married girl Nafeesa had just seen. She too, must have been given basketsful of sweets and fruits, lot more gifts like good clothes, bed linen, furniture, and jewelry too, as her parents were quite well to do. Many relatives would have come to see her off. Her father's eyes would have glistened with unshed tears and, hiding behind the pillars, the brother would have cried. With hearts heavy as lead and legs numb with worry about her future life, they would have waved her good bye.

Nafeesa was a good ten years old at that time so she vividly remembered Badi Amma as a bride. She was resplendent in her red and gold bridal attire which was a little old fashioned,

countrified rather, but expensive. Most of other items in her trousseau were the same too.

The groom's marriage party had consisted of only five people. The gifts they had taken for Badi Amma were few and ordinary, as neither the groom nor the family were financially very sound. Apart from that Bade Abba, the groom, was not ready for marriage. There was a lack of enthusiasm, which usually does not mark most weddings as there is much to rejoice.

"Can't afford a wife and family", he said when his mother insisted it was high time he got a bride for himself like any other normal person. "Why add to my woes Amma?" he used to say, but never added, "And why to the woes of someone's unsuspecting daughter, too."

"God is there to provide for everyone. Why don't you trust Him?" His mother quoted from the scriptures.

"God does provide for all of us but forgets when it comes to equal distribution. People run with what they can lay their hands upon, leaving others high and dry," he would retort when the scriptures were quoted. He was both irreverent as well as petulant. Stubborn was another adjective which could be added to describe his personality but he eventually agreed to marriage when, leaving three small children behind, Nafisa's mother died suddenly. "Amma is getting old. As for Ashfaq Miyan, he loved his wife so much that perhaps he will take time to consider the idea of remarriage. In all probability never." So to look after his niece and nephews who were rendered motherless, he brought Badi Amma as his wife. Badi Amma, it was such a misnomer. She was barely out of her teens, delicate, almost fragile, brought up in an overprotective family, she herself seemed as if she needed someone who would take care of her needs, but she took to her new surroundings like a duck to water.

Just after the second round of her in-law's house she pushed the traditional veil of the new bride aside and with her tapering,

hennaed fingers (as the colour had not yet gone from them) she took over the entire household. “Nafeesa, come here child, let me do your plaits.”

“Try this kurta, does it fit well?”

“Suhail, come here your face needs a wash.”

“Aqeel, it’s time for school. Did you arrange your bag last night? Your tiffin box is on the dining table, don’t forget to pick it up.”

Women from the neighbourhood were always singing her praises but Bade Abba, as dour faced as ever, remained indifferent to his young wife. More often than not, his conversation with her consisted of instructions or questions such as:

“Did you take Amma to the doctor’s?”

“Nafeesa is hardly seen sitting at her study table. See that she spends less time romping around the neighbourhood.”

“Aqeel is looking run down these days, don’t you think you should pay more attention to his food?”

And so on and so forth. Badi Amma’s answers were usually in monosyllables: Yes; No; Alright; Very well etc.etc.

The grand finale of daily chores was pressing her grandmother, Dadi’s, legs. That over, she entered her room only to find Bade Abba snoring away with either the newspaper or a book pressed against his chest, which she would remove gently, cover him properly, and lie beside him quietly.

Years later when Nafeesa got married and knew what bliss it was to lean against her husband’s chest, chat incessantly, go out with him, cook for him and discuss the future of their children who had yet not arrived, she realised what Badi Amma had been missing in her life. Not that she did not have any physical relationship with her husband at all, but somehow they did not have children of their own. Perhaps it was Bade Abba’s decision, perhaps he was happy with his younger brother’s children whom he loved as his own. Badi Amma, too, loved them but could a woman feel happy without her own? Badi

Amma never gave expression to her innermost feelings but her eyes had an empty look even when she smiled. No one understood those unspoken words, not even Nafeesa, till she became a mother herself, but by then she was deeply involved with her own immediate family. Slowly and gradually, others too, receded in the background: Bade Abba, who had married for the sake of her and her siblings, her unconditional love for Dadi, Abba, and above all Badi Amma who, without any bonds of blood, had brought up her husband's brother's children like her own. All these were now just a memory, the story of an era that had gone by, leaving behind trails which were overshadowed by her husband, children, in-laws...pillars on which an Indian woman's life rests.

When Nafeesa was leaving her parental home as a new bride, Badi Amma had come close, put her hand on her shoulder and said, "God only knows I discharged my duty towards you with utmost sincerity. My heart is saddened at the idea of sending you so far away from home, but I am happy that I can hold my head high. I can face your Bade Abba, your Abba and, on the day of judgment, your late mother, with a conscience that is clear. Still, I am a human being. So, if there was something lacking please forgive me for that." She was looking much older than her years; her eyes betrayed her pain. Nafeesa was overwhelmed. Tongue-tied with emotion, she could not say that her own mother wouldn't have done any better. The lump in her throat was so forbidding, she could not even cry.

Piercing the morning mist, the rickshaw surged ahead; street lights twinkled through the thinning veil of the night. Nafeesa looked up at the sky to look at the big, shining star which seemed to keep pace with the rickshaw puller. Perhaps it was the same morning star which used to peep through the large window of her bedroom at home, and perhaps Badi Amma too mentioned it when she spoke of a big bright star

shining through the dense foliage of the sadabahar creeper at her parents' house which she had planted herself when she was a child. Her parents' big house had had a garden where she had loved tending to the flower beds and fruit-bearing trees.

"Nafeesa, the weeds in my garden were really stubborn. No matter how hard I tried to pull them out, they never went. I used to get peeved at the sight of them but how strange it is! I miss them here. If nothing else, they would have brought some greenery", she had once said ruefully.

When Badi Amma was casting aside all that she was fond of, love for greenery was the only thing she had retained. She once asked Nafeesa's brother, Suhail, to get her some potted plants of the fragrant bela, jasmine and rose flowers. Perhaps this was the only expense she allowed herself, out of her own free will. Though she was very scared of Bade Abba, she remained quite unruffled when he growled, "Now, what is this jhad-jhankad, these trees and plants you have collected!" His growl went unheeded, the jhad-jhankad remained. And it remained till Suhail got married. As an extra room was required to accommodate the new bride, a latticed bamboo screen was erected around the extra space where the pots had been, and the pots were given away to the housemaid who loved to adorn her hair with the sweet smelling bela flowers.

The rickshaw turned into a narrow lane. Making things bright and clear; morning had descended. A huge but dilapidated, mansion-like house appeared in sight, as if almost suddenly. "Here, here is your Fazal Manzil", the rickshaw puller was saying. "One by one the elderly left for their heavenly abode, and the young fanned out in search of greener pastures. Only an old woman is living here. Perhaps she is Fazal Sahab's widowed daughter." He sighed and continued, "No one wants to look after the elderly these days. She might have been turned out of her marital home for all you know. People also say she is childless."

This is the drawback of a small, mofussil town; everyone seems to know everyone else. Nafeesa did not like the familiarity the rickshaw puller showed. She kept quiet.

The house had come closer. A huge lock could be seen dangling from its gate. "Is there any other entrance?" Nafeesa wondered "Where could Badi Amma have gone?"

"Wait, I will ask someone if there is any other entrance, or if the lady has gone somewhere." Seeing Ayaz's tardiness, the rickshaw puller came to Nafeesa's rescue. Just then they saw an elderly gentleman coming out of the neighbouring house. It was time for morning prayers. In all probability, he was going to the mosque. The rickshaw puller stopped him. "Sahab, there was a lady living here, Mir Fazal sahab's daughter? Do you know anything about her?"

"Oh, she... she died the day before. Who has come to see her?" he said with a hint of sadness in his voice and came close to the rickshaw.

"She died the day before", the simple words hit Nafeesa like bullets. She was dumbfounded. For a few moments they did not even mean what they had meant. She died, but why? Why did she not wait for me? How could she do that without seeing me? Her brain fired a volley of questions in return, but then, slowly and gradually, like a vulture spreading its wings, swooping down on its prey, the finality of death, the cruelty of it dawned upon her. Badi Amma was beyond all questions; all ifs and buts, all hows and whys.

"Please come to our house and rest for a while. You seem to have come from a distant place" said the kind, elderly gentleman and led them to a house close by. His wife, equally old and kind-hearted, started making tea for them. The gentleman left for his prayers requesting them not to leave till he came back.

The lady of the house handed them their cups of tea and sat silently in front of them.

“She was my aunt, my paternal uncle’s wife. Had no children of her own. We were her children. I was her favourite. From among all the relatives she was closest to me. And ... and she wrote to me to come and visit her.” Nafeesa spoke quietly. The old lady listened. No questions asked, no interruptions made.

“My Dadi was the first to go, then Bade Abba. My father suffered a stroke and lay paralysed for almost seven years. My brothers had got married and had moved away to places far from our home town. I too had to shift. It was Badi Amma who looked after our bed-ridden father. We only visited occasionally. She came here after Abba’s death. All her duties were discharged. She was absolved of all responsibilities.”

Now she was weeping bitterly. “If only I had come a little earlier. She might have given vent to some of her feelings. Could have shed some of her emotional baggage before setting out on her final journey. Above all, she would have felt that after all there was someone who cared.” Tears rolled down Nafeesa’s cheeks.

The old lady still remained silent. Perhaps she had no words to comfort her, or perhaps she was thinking of her own fate in case she survived her husband. Ayaz too, stared at his mother with blank eyes. Grieving so much for an old lady whom she had even not met for a long time was perhaps beyond his comprehension.

“The key to the house is with us.” The lady broke her silence at last and said plaintively. “According to her will she has been buried in the garden itself.” She then drew a deep breath. “There is hardly any garden now. Only the gnarled trees overhung by badly entwined creepers, housing bats and owls. Snakes and mongooses and field rats are seen scurrying about.” Then she added after a little pause, “But you should freshen up first and have something to eat. After that you can go and pray and say the fatiha over her grave.”

Nafeesa got to her feet. “No I will go there first.”

The massive teak-wood gate creaked, opening into a vast courtyard which looked painfully desolate. The quiet was so eloquent it went straight to the heart. A little away from the overgrowth, the dry leaves and a fallen tree, a small place had been cleared for her burial. The freshly turned earth around the grave still looked fresh, moist and crumbly. Throwing new shoots from under the earth in just three days' time, the grass seemed to have showered the grave with fine, green confetti.

Badi Amma laughed. "Nafeesa, didn't I tell you that the weeds in my garden were really stubborn. I pulled handfuls of them out but the very next day they were there. In a couple of days the grave in its solitary wilderness will be completely covered by them."

"Why did you die, Badi Amma? I mean, without meeting me?" Nafeesa addressed the grave quietly and raised her hands for *fatiha*, tears still rolling down her cheeks.



The Doll



Dusk had fallen by the time she set off from her home. The train was to leave at 9:00 in the night, as those people had said. She knew what a train was. A couple of trains used to pass by her village skirting the sugarcane and arhar fields. She had never thought it necessary to wonder where they came from or where they went. Nor had she ever had the opportunity to travel by train. Her kutcha hut with its thatched roof was in the back of a God-forsaken village where there was no mode of transport to travel till the bus stand. They had to walk a short distance, and then get on a bus to where a train could be caught. She had boarded the bus and the bus stop was so near her house that she had often gone there just like that. There was a pond near the bus stand where people would bathe their buffaloes and tap toddy from the two palm trees that stood beside it. Buffaloes and ducks and pigs would be rooting around. Clacking hens would flap in their midst and goats too would get into the melee. No one said anything to any of them. She had never thought that any of these things had any significance in her life. They were just there. They had always been there. Just like the fields, the neighbourhood, air, water, her Amma and Abba, brothers and sisters and her drunk of a Mamu. Suddenly they had all become very important today, even those ugly pigs for whom Maulvi Sahib used to

say that one should recite the *Lalhoul*¹ if perchance one's gaze falls upon them. While setting foot outside her house, her first thought was whether all these would be there where she was going. Or one should say where she was being taken. Forget the pond, even Amma had become important at this time... for whom she had often wondered why doesn't she die; she was always scolding her. And if the food was scarce, Amma would feed the sons. Before today, she had never experienced the love she had for her Amma. If Amma gave all the food to her sons, then she herself wouldn't eat either on that day. And when Amma put her hand on her head as she was leaving... what was that feeling that caused her to experience tears welling up inside her tiny heart? She felt as though Amma was lovely.

The two younger brothers and a sister came and stood on either side of her – perhaps the six-month old sister lying on the loose-strung bed also turned on her side and flung her skinny leg with the black string in the air. Amma used to say that the black string keeps away the evil eye. Who was likely to cast an evil eye on this skinny, dark, baby who didn't even have the strength to cry out loud?

Those two who were walking along beside her with long strides seemed very nice to her. A fragrance was wafting out from them, the sort of fragrance that wafts out from a *maulsari* tree, or when the *raat ki rani* blossoms in the unpaved compound, or when the *haarsingaar* laughs as it strews its flowers. Such a fragrance never came from human beings. Would the *raat ki rani* be blooming in the homes of these fragrant people? Would the *maulsari* tree be found there? Would the *haarsinghaar* be laughingly strewing its tiny star-like white flowers, whose delicate stems are the same dark orange as a duck's beak, there too?

1 *Lahoul willa quwwat*, a verse from the Holy Quran meaning 'There is no power and no strength except with Allah.' This fragment is recited to ward off evil and a reaffirmation that a person cannot do anything save with the will and help of Allah.

Would there be a pond there as well? Would those dirty pigs be found beside it? The same pigs that made her angry when her Abba called his own children 'pig's children'? (She used to dislike her Abba who used abuses but now she was feeling sorry for him as he stood silently to one side.) How do lives change in the blink of an eye? (She didn't have the words to think like this but thoughts don't have the limitation of words, or else the mute and deaf would never be able to think.) As she was leaving, she turned once to look at her beloved goat that was sitting tethered to a peg and happily chewing the cud. Her two little ones were merrily jumping about nearby and the goat's udders, filled with milk, were nearly touching the ground. She felt like going close to the goat, putting her arms around its neck and saying goodbye.

As the bus moved, everything began to be left behind – her mamu who had stolen the anklet that was the last of her Amma's silver ornaments after getting drunk on toddy, and the swaying palm trees that drank air and got high, the fields, pond, the cows that stood impudently in the middle of the road, the little lamp flickering on the shop of Imarti Sau, and the dogs that barked needlessly. When the train moved, the speed with which all that was being left behind got left behind only increased. Though, the moon was indeed moving along with her and that star too, the one that used to peer at her from directly above her home. Will they go all the way to the city of Patna with her? Will they be visible from the home of those people too?

Amma had told her to call those people Bhaiya and Bhabhi. They fed her and set out her bedding. The train was swaying. At first she had thought it would be a long and difficult night. But she slept so soundly that she had to be woken up with a good shake the next morning.

Her eyes became round as saucers when she saw the railway station, the house and its neighbourhood. It was as though

a fish from a pond had been plucked out and flung into the mighty Ganga river.

In the house there was a kind elderly lady. Everyone called her Amma. The two who had brought her were both Amma's sons. There was also a daughter-in-law and two small boys, a five-year old and the other about two-and-a-half or three years old. The children were beautiful, healthy and happy – although she didn't have the words 'healthy' and 'happy' in her vocabulary.

Everyone would take a bath everyday and change their clothes. And they had so many clothes! Even she had been given two sets of clothes immediately. In fact, Bhabhi had sent one set of clothes with her and made her wear them for the journey. Her grimy, old set of clothes had been left behind there. She was also given a pair of new slippers and a ribbon for her hair. She was also given a small box to keep all this. "Is it mine? Mine?" she had stuttered. After a long time, she could actually believe that all these things were hers.

Everyone was treating her well. Except the fat servant woman who came mornings and evenings to do the sweeping and cleaning and cooked the food. She was the only one who seemed at odds with her. On the very first day, she had said: "Hey you, girl, do you know only how to stare like a bullock, or can you do any work?"

At this the old lady had admonished her, "She will learn, she will learn. In any case, there's hardly any work. She only has to look after the two children."

Despite several days having passed, she looked at the whole place with wide open eyes as though all the wonder of the world had gathered into them. One day, the children's Mamu came there. She kept staring at him for a long time too. Are there Mamus like this too? Dressed in a fine pant and shirt? Would such a cheerful person, the sort who got a lot of chocolates for the children, steal their sister's jewellery?

“Arrey, where did you find her?” He asked the elderly lady. He, too, called her Amma.

“She is the daughter of a poor relative of the Kishanganj family. She was not needed there. So, they sent her here.”

“Arrey, so get one for us as well!”

“What a thing to say! As though she is being sold in the market!”

“Doesn’t she have a sister?”

“She does, but now her parents won’t send her. It takes a lot of courage to send a girl outside. They sent this one because they had complete trust in the Kishanganj family.”

“Amma, you are not concerned about us.”

“My dear, I have to be concerned about myself first. I was looking after two children all on my own at my age. Dulhan begum is away at her job all day. I have raised my own children. Now my old age is being ruined.”

“Arrey, can you call your sister?” He addressed her directly. She kept gaping at him.

“She just keeps looking like that with goggle eyes. She doesn’t do any work at all. She has only come here to eat. She eats moundfuls.” The fat servant woman muttered under her breath.

“Bua, don’t talk like that!” The lady who was called Amma had very sharp ears. “She will look after the children. I am still training her. As for food, she’s hungry still. When she has eaten her fill, she will be like the rest of us.”

Her training had started.

The elder child used to go to school. (She herself had never been to a school. The brother who was younger than her used to occasionally wander into the Maulvi Sahab’s madarsa at the mosque. Here, a five-year old child would go to a school, that too every day, without fail...) Ya Mazhar al-Ajaib²! (But she

2 The phrase *Mazhar al-Ajaib* translates as: ‘The locus of Manifestation of Marvels’; it is found in the Shia supplication ‘*Nadi Ali*’ (‘Call Ali’).

didn't know how to say Ya Mazhar al-Ajaib.) Getting the child ready for school, putting the tiffin box and water bottle in his bag, polishing his shoes and after he had left for school, looking after the younger one—these were her elementary lessons. She had to give the younger one a bottle filled with milk, which he drank three or four times in a day. Every time she had to pour the milk in the bottle, she was supposed to wash her hands with soap. At home, she would not wash her hands even after she had made dung patties.

These children had a large basketful of toys. Despite this, they got a couple of new toys every week. Sometimes either one of the parents bought it, and sometimes when the children went out for an outing, they themselves demanded a new toy and it was bought for them. More often than not, they bought motors. Car, truck, bus, police car, bike and then guns, revolvers, fake bullets, a train that went round and round on its tracks, footballs, etc. After all, they were boys and so there was no doll among their toys. Once, she had seen a plastic doll at a fair and had wanted it desperately. Abba had bought her an ugly clay doll instead. The plastic doll was very expensive. It hadn't been much fun playing with the clay doll. And when she had fought with her brother, he had broken it on the third day itself.

But one day, in this house of boys, her wondering eyes found a doll. It was very big, almost the size of a new born human baby, fat, soft, with blue eyes and golden hair. It was dressed in a real frock. Its shoes were real too. And a red ribbon was tied in her hair. What else was there to see in this house? Can there be such a doll? So beautiful as though it is alive and will begin speaking at any moment! She wanted to pick it up and cradle it in her lap.

By now Bhabhi had also given her the task of sweeping and mopping her room. For some days the fat servant woman had been complaining of having extra work. The first day

she had entered the room, her eyes had immediately fallen on the doll; it was kept in a glass cabinet. When she kept staring at it for a long time, Bhabhi told her that it was her doll. She had brought it from her home a few days after her marriage. Usually she was tongue tied with wonderment; and, in any case, she was a quiet girl by temperament. Bhabhi was quite young. In fact, she looked like a girl but since she was married and had two children, would women her age be playing with dolls that she had brought home her doll? Where does one get a doll like this and for how much money? All these questions kept rising from the layers of her mind and getting buried back in those same layers. Though, yes, the desire to touch the doll and to play with it rose within her like a mad passion.

It was one of those days when Amma had, as was her usual practice, gone to rest in her room and Bhaiyya and Bhabhi were at their respective offices. She had taken the two children to their room and was trying to put them to sleep even though neither child was willing to sleep.

“Hey, play with us.”

“Babu, will you play with the doll?”

“We are not girls. Only girls play with dolls. Let’s play ‘Thieves and Cops’.”

“Won’t you play with me? I am a girl. Shall I bring it?” She had gained entry into Bhabhi’s room by now.

She shifted the walnut-wood stool kept in front of the dressing table, climbed it and brought the doll down. When she put it in her lap she felt as though a centuries-old thirst had been slaked. She ran her fingers through its hair. Then untied the ribbon and re-tied it, and put the frock back on. The boy had never played with a doll but now he was enjoying it too. The younger boy was sitting and rocking himself on his rocking horse. The older one handed him the doll and said, “Seat her on your horse. We will take her on a ride.”

All three burst out laughing. For the first time since coming here she had laughed like that, from the depths of her heart. Laughter like that had possibly never ever echoed in her own house.

“Keep it back now”, the elder one said. “Mummy will scold us if she sees it.”

But that day a new page opened in her life. From now on, the doll would quietly climb down in the afternoon and all three would play with it. She had made the doll the younger sister of the two boys. If not the younger one, the older one certainly had some idea of what a sister meant. The doll would get into the car or ride on the horse and go for a ride with them. One day, her frock and ribbon were washed and dried. By now the girl had been taught to iron the boys' clothes. She switched on the iron and ironed both the things. The ribbon and frock were put on afresh. The ribbon was tied in a new style but then retied in the old style before the doll was put back.

“I wish I could show this doll to my sister. She would have played with it too. My poor little sister! She is eight years old and she has never had a doll. She will be so happy if she were to see this”, she thought.

By now the wonderment in her eyes had lessened somewhat, but a storm of yearnings raged in her heart. Today, they had played ‘school-school’. It was the older boy's idea. He played the teacher; the girl and the doll were the students. The younger boy too had abandoned his helicopter and had come and sat in the ‘class’ for a little while. The children had a real board, a really big one. But it was not black; it was white. There was a special pen for writing on it which wrote in very thick letters. You could wipe it clean whenever you wanted and write another letter or draw a picture. The older boy had many beautiful books with colourful pictures. By now a book with many shiny pictures had been brought for the younger boy too. He was nearly three-and-a-half-years old. They were talking of

putting him in school. The picture book was very attractive. Her brother, who studied in the madarsa, had a book that looked so terrible that it was enough to make one run away from reading. Nothing but black letters on mottled paper and so fragile that it could tear if you so much as put your hand to it. If her brother had got the book that Babu was using to teach A, B, C, D in his role as the teacher, he would not have run away from reading.

Amma had got a primer for the Quran for her. In the evenings, she would make her sit beside her and teach her. She wanted to read from the picture books too and so she really liked the game of 'school-school' that Babu had started.

"They say that a good servant comes by with good fortune." She heard Amma tell someone one day when she was moving away after her lesson. Perhaps some visitor had dropped by. "This girl has been sent by Allah. She looks after both the children. She's a big help. Actually, she was the eldest in her family. She's no more than nine or ten years old. After her, her mother had four more; she used to look after them. She only had to learn our ways. She's bright, and has picked up quickly."

Do even servants suffer from the evil eye? God save her, it was only yesterday that Amma had said this, or perhaps it was the day before. But this morning she was found to be missing from the house.

Sick with worry, all of them looked ashen-faced. She was someone else's daughter. And then the state of affairs being what they are these days... neither a five-year old nor a fifty-year old is safe in the city. Chaos had broken out in the house.

"I say, look at the household things before looking for the girl. I have been saying it all along. She used to look at everything with eyes like a bullock's. Last night when Dulhan returned from the wedding, she had left her jewellery out in the open", the fat servant woman said. "Someone may have been an accomplice with her." Bhabhi quickly opened her dressing-table

drawer. When she had been taking off her earrings, the girl had been standing nearby watching her closely.

The earrings were there. So were the gold bangles.

“Dulhan, you had withdrawn money from the bank the day before yesterday. You are very careless. Where did you keep it?” Amma too piped in.

Bhabhi quickly rifled through her bag. A bundle of five hundred rupee notes was there. She counted the money. They were all there. The box she had been given to keep her clothes was still there. The clothes were there too. What then?

“What has she taken? Who has she gone off with?” the servant woman asked.

“Ai hai, Bua, have some fear of God! She is just a girl, no more than ten years old!” Amma said.

“They watch TV and become full grown women at the age of ten nowadays”, the servant woman answered.

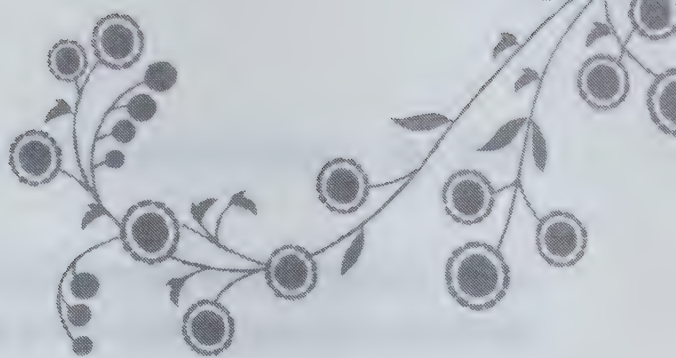
The husband and wife took the day off. If they were to report to the police, they could be arrested under the child labour laws. Anyhow, if it came to that, they could always say she was a poor relative and had been sent here by her parents to get an education. The girl had put them in a difficult situation. Amma had pampered her. After all, Amma was most at ease because of her. She was scared that if the girl didn't settle down or if she was unhappy, she might leave. Now she has to pay for it. Rather, everyone has to pay for it. They set out in the car. Who knows she might have got into a train or a bus and set off for somewhere? What will happen to her then? It'd be good if she reaches her home but if she doesn't, what will they say to her parents? Those poor things! They had handed over their daughter on trust. Who knows which silent tears the mother had wiped away with her grubby veil as she had stood silently to bid goodbye when they had left?

After running around for the entire day, they found her sitting at the station. Spreading the amazement from her wide

open eyes all around her, she was trying to figure out which of the trains that came and went were likely to go to her village. Her lips were parched. Tears had dried on her cheeks. The doll was clutched under one arm, and so was the primer with ‘A, B, C, D.’

—*Translated from the Urdu by Rakhshanda Jalil*





The Forbidden Fruit



Ajit, as usual, finished his cup of coffee and smoked a couple of cigarettes before hitting the bed but a part of his rituals was left out: he did not put his arms around Amita. Amita waited for a while, then, coming close to him rested her head delicately on his broad, muscular and hairy chest. Her thick, luxuriant tresses cascaded down his chest. A stray strand touched Ajit's nostrils, almost tickling him. Snorting, he pushed the hair away, and also tried to wrench himself free. But Amita, like a stubborn child, kept clinging.

"Ajit, darling, I can't sleep if I am not touching you", she said with child-like innocence.

"Oh, come on, first sweep your hair back. It is all over me. Why dont you tie it before coming to bed?" He said, irritated.

He was suddenly reminded of Mrs. Khanna's hair, swept back neatly, without a parting, tied in a tight plait. Once he had gone to the first floor to ask Khanna sahab the scores of a test match, which he had missed out on. Mr. Khanna was not home and perhaps because of his absence, Mrs. Khanna was prepared to retire somewhat early. In that severe hairstyle her heart-shaped face and chiseled features had become very prominent. Ajit's lips curled in a sly smile.

Amita's eyes widened, in wonderment. "What's wrong today", she mused. Ajit always said that he liked her hair best when kept open, long and thick, cascading like a waterfall. Where was the time to play with it during the day? It was

only at night that he ran his fingers through it to his heart's content. "Did you not insist that I should keep my hair open at night?" Amita said quietly.

"I did? Oh, really! When?"

"Are you not feeling well? Worried over something?" Amita pulled herself back gently. Then sweeping her hair back, she put her hand over Ajit's forehead and finally her soft demanding lips.

Ajit's irritation changed into anger but he restrained himself. These women! God bless the man whose woman starts suspecting him. Like a deadly snake she will spew venom. Her very breath will become poisonous. Hissing like a king cobra she will dance around, ready to sink her fangs into anyone who dares to make her see reason.

Now Amita's fingers were caressing Ajit's hair. Long, slender and soft they felt like petals of a flower. Ajit felt a cool, sleepy languor descend upon him. His eyes opened and then closed again languidly. Mrs. Khanna's face bobbed up and down on the waves of drowsiness that preceded a good night's sleep. Then he thought of Amita, his lovely, good-natured wife who, sensing that Ajit was sounding somewhat disturbed, had withdrawn quietly and was lying next to him trying to soothe his imaginary nerves. Must be some problem relating to his office, she must have thought. Ajit's dormant love for her came to the fore for a while. Ever since Mrs. Khanna had come to live as their tenant, this is what had been happening. He oscillated between affection and irritation for Amita. He was thoroughly confused these days; did not know how to categorise these ambivalent feelings of his.

Ajit lived on the ground floor of the beautiful two-storied house, always renting out the upper floor. The previous tenant was a partially educated, uncouth businessman whom Ajit could get rid of with great difficulty. He had hung garish calendars on the living room walls, driving nails and pegs in every nook and corner. From the terrace came torrents of vegetable peels

and shells of all kinds of nuts. If nothing, then cigarette butts and ashes from ashtrays. Ill-mannered children plucked flowers from his well-tended garden and the maid spread out baby garments on his well-manicured lawn (on the pretext of not getting enough sun in their part of the house).

The lawn was Amita's pride and joy. The mistress of the house refused food cooked by Amita saying they were pure vegetarians while the landlords ate 'all kinds of flesh'. Ajit was livid at this self-righteousness. He did not mind leaving the house vacant till he found someone of his choice. The new occupants came through Saran, a family friend. Ajit felt he had not acquired tenants but an exotic piece of decoration for his drawing room when Saran introduced them to him. No doubt Mr. Khanna was quite smart but Mrs. Khanna...oh she was beyond compare.

There are lots of women who have fair, flawless skin, then there are those who are endowed with a good figure; a small upturned nose is not uncommon either but a really balanced combination of all these, with a heady mix of sex appeal, is certainly not something which one sees very often.

Just as the basic recipe for qorma requires same ingredients – tender mutton, curd, onions, some aromatic spices – but a right combination of these is known to a few people only or else why would qorma cooked by different chefs taste so different? Ajit wanted to taste... er... atleast smell this handi, too.

"Bala e jaan hai Ghalib uski her baat..." Ajit went on repeating the line from Ghalib mentally; it almost became an obsession like a needle of an old record player which gets stuck in one place playing the line incessantly, in fact, irritatingly. Ghalib was enamoured with everything pertaining to his beloved, and so was Ajit. In his sleep-laden voice he started humming it again.

Suddenly he became conscious of Amita's presence. Oh shit! What would she think about me? Just a minute ago, I

was irritated with her and now I am reciting Ghalib. She will get after my life. Dear God, why did you create women? He looked at her from the corners of his eyes. She had almost fallen asleep. He thanked God. Now she won't stand guard at my dreams – dreams that are dreamt with eyes wide open.

Mrs. Khanna's diamond nose stud flashed in the dark. Yesterday's incident came to Ajit's mind. It was a holiday. Amita said, "Darling, will you just go up and ask Mrs. Khanna to lend her coffee percolator? I am going to have my bath or I would have gone myself." She was carrying a small tray laden with a variety of skin care products: shampoo, nail file and other random paraphernalia. So it was to be her elaborate weekly bath ritual. She would take at least an hour in the bathroom. Ajit pinched her cheeks in glee and bounded up the stairs. Reclining on her diwan, Mrs. Khanna was browsing through a film magazine, looking very much a part of the decor of her expensively decorated drawing room.

"Hi!" She dazzled her evenly set white teeth.

"Mrs. Khanna...." She interrupted him in the middle, "Look, it is now more than six months that we know each other. We also get along fine. Then why this formality? Please call me Sheela."

"Oh actually the thing is..."

"Nothing doing, call me Sheela, only, then I will listen to you." She interrupted again.

"Okay, Sheela ji", Ajit's blood started pounding at his temples. He gathered courage. "Sheela ji, Amita wants to borrow your coffee percolator."

"By all means you can have it but why not to have a cup of coffee here first?" Without waiting for a reply she summoned the maid. Ajit made himself comfortable on an easy chair. With his wife gone for an elaborate bath, he could sit for some time. Coffee took no time to arrive. Cups in hand they chatted merrily.

They had many occasions when they had spent time together, but in the company of their respective spouses. This was the

second time they were sitting alone. So far they had been very formal too. Now chinks were appearing in the formality. Few more times and it will crumble completely.

Ajit felt he was a tomcat who was dreaming of nice juicy pieces of meat. But suddenly he was overpowered by a sense of self-reproach. "Fie on me. What is that I am thinking of. And that too despite of having a wife like Amita who has always proven to be a wonderful companion."

Just then, Mrs. Khanna got up to pick up the empty cups. This time she had not called the maid. As she bent in front of Ajit, the deep neckline of her blouse went further down revealing soft, supple skin and ample cleavage.

Also, a faint but lovely fragrance assailed Ajit's olfactory nerves. Was it really required of Mrs. Khanna to do the job herself, that too by bending right in front? Ajit was really confused. He would have lingered there for some more time but Amita hollered from downstairs, "I say Ajit, I had only asked for the percolator, are you getting the coffee made there itself?"

Amita had a natural cheer in her voice, an outcome of her sunny temperament, but the guilt that lurked in Ajit's heart questioned it. Was the cheerfulness genuine or fake to disguise suspicion? Did her words not betray any sarcasm? Handing the percolator to her, he gave Amita an intent look, but she quickly disappeared into the kitchen.

"Listen Meetu, Mrs. Khanna was asking if you have done any course in interior designing. She finds our house so beautifully done."

Amita's beaming face appeared in the kitchen window. Ajit heaved a sigh of relief. God did make women, but He did not furnish their beautiful heads with enough intelligence, or else it would have been very difficult to please them by merely admiring the decor of their houses.

He picked up his towel and got into the bathroom, telling Amita he would not be long. While soaping himself he wondered

as to how he should interpret Mrs. Khanna's behaviour. Was she just a fun loving, free, cheerful, extrovert? Was she as friendly with everyone she came accross, or was she developing a soft corner for Ajit?

The very possibility of Mrs. Khanna having a soft spot for him sent his heart into raptures.

Unmindful, he finished half the soap cake off. Perhaps he would have finished the whole cake, had Amita not called out saying the coffee was getting cold.

No harm trying my luck, he thought, and put away Amita's arm aside as she slept. "Let us see what the qorma in this pot is like?" He smiled under his clipped moustache.

In the morning, when he woke up, Amita was putting his breakfast tea on the bedside table. She poured two cups and snuggled up to him. Ajit's dressing gown was hanging at the head, his slippers were under the bed, Amita's characteristic smile was playing on her lips. Her freshly shampooed hair smelt nice. She had completely forgotten Ajit being out of sorts last night.

Once again Ajit reproached himself. Why am I thinking of that woman? Am I not being unfair to my unsuspecting, caring wife? But after he had finished the tea his senses were attacked by that cleavage-revealing neckline one more time and what followed in the evening was no less than an explosion.

Mrs. Khanna came down, admired their lawn and asked Ajit to have tea with her. "I hate having to drink my tea alone. In fact, I hate being alone in the evenings, but this blessed job of my husband which requires so much travelling leaves me with little option", she said ruefully. "Tomorrow again he is going on his week long tour."

The bomb that had exploded had left stars dancing in front of Ajit's eyes. Colourful and bright and laden with great expectations.

"You are coming? Aren't you?"

“In the evening we are going over to one of Amita’s friend’s house who is celebrating her wedding anniversary.” Ajit’s voice betrayed his frustration.

She laughed; silver bells tinkled some where very close to him.

“It is Amita’s friend, not yours. Let her go. We will have our tea here, together.”

Ajit was completely bowled over. “What a lucky dog I am! But how lucky, that is yet to be seen.”

In the evening Ajit feigned a headache. Why, he even swallowed two painkillers in front of Amita to convince her.

“Mitu darling you go. It is their first wedding anniversary. I will rest here, am feeling a bit queasy too.”

Amita looked worried. “You must have eaten some junk from the office canteen. That crook Anwar must have gobbled up all the chicken sandwiches I packed for you. Call Dr. Saxena. Shall I do that for you? And if you are feeling too unwell I will cancel the programme.” As always, she babbled without even pausing to catch her breath.

Ajit was so angry his moustache quivered. If he could, he would have hacked Amita into pieces and buried all the pieces separately so that they could never come together to form a whole again.

Suppressing his anger he replied hurriedly. “No darling, you must go. I only want to avoid crowd and noise; the headache is not such a big deal. But if you want to stay back you can.” He winked at her. “We can celebrate our wedding anniversary in advance. You are looking as beautiful as a new bride.”

“You rascal!” forgetting Ajit’s headache, Amita started laughing.

No sooner did Amita leave the house, that Ajit kicked his blanket aside and bounded up the stairs. He found the drawing room quiet but from the adjoining room he could hear Mrs.

Khanna humming, “balam aye baso more man men” (come my beloved; reside in my yearning heart)

Heart aflutter, he called out to her. “Sheela ji!”

“Yes, come in.”

He felt reluctant; he had never been in their bed room before.

“Oh come on in. What are you thinking about?” The curtain from the window got pushed aside a little, Mrs. Khanna’s nose stud flashed a thousand shards of light.

Ajit entered the room. Everything there spoke of good taste and luxury: an opulence that is the preserved of those who value their comfort, and can afford to pay for it too.

He threw a glance at Mrs. Khanna. She was running a hairbrush through her thick, shoulder-length hair. Her blouse was almost backless, exposing her soft golden, flawless skin and long, slender back.

Ajit was overpowered by that crazy desire again...the desire to touch her, to feel if she was real. There are some people who do not look real; just seem to be an illusion.

“It is only because of you that I sent Amita alone.” Ajit put stress on the because of you.

“Thank you Ajit ji, you are a nice person and your wife is really lucky to have such wonderful husband. And then there is Rajesh, your Mr. Khanna. Every other day he is travelling. God only knows whether the office really requires that much touring or there is something behind the smoke screen.” She chuckled. While praising Ajit she sounded genuine. There were no pretensions, no sarcasm either. She had now come very close to him, so close that Ajit felt her breath next to his face.

Blood kicked inside every vein of his like hard liquor.

Ajit could not figure out how the inevitable happened between the two of them: the weak moment of the flesh, as old as time, and men and women. When Mrs. Khanna drew herself away, Ajit felt he was a gambler who had lost the last game. Her kohl was smudged, the powder on her face was

patchy. Her lipstick was gone, and her overall countenance showed the contentment of a tomcat who had just killed a fat juicy mouse for a satiating meal.

Ajit blinked his eyes in wonderment and thought as to why he had put this woman on such a high pedestal; why did she appear to him as some nymph who had descended from the heaven above, the woman who was hardly different from any other ordinary woman. Were these moments of stolen pleasure any different from what he got through Amita?

All calculations yielded the same results. Then why had he been losing sleep over her for last six months? Just to open an envelope which was sealed? Just to satisfy a morbid curiosity? Or winning the favours of an unrelated, new woman who seemed impossible and hence a challenge for Ajit's manhood? He got up quietly, helped her into her dressing gown and left without even a backward glance at her.

At night after returning from the party, when Amita removed her makeup and started tying her hair into a tight plait before retiring, Ajit buried his face into her shoulders and said, "Meetu, leave the hair open. I like it this way. And where do I get time to play with your lovely long tresses during the day?"



Day care



The crowd there was always dense. People jostled as if free gifts were being distributed. But could the faces of those who come to receive free gifts look like the ones seen there? They were pinched, gloomy and wrought with fear. Fear of death. Fear of a long period of troubled life; drain of finances, apprehension of losing near and dear ones. Losing one's own precious life.

That young girl with agony writ large in her beautiful eyes was sitting patiently, waiting for her name to be called. Someone had put a kerchief on the chair next to her indicating that the seat was not vacant.

"May I sit here?" Someone asked. The voice was soft and gentle yet it made the girl start. She remained quiet though. Her body felt numb. The question was repeated, this time with a gentle hand on her shoulder. Perhaps the touch had a silent language, a language that penetrated right into the heart. The girl lifted her eyes and looked at the woman. She was much older, around forty.

"Please be seated. Someone was sitting here earlier. You may leave when he comes back. No need to ask me", she replied this time as if with some effort. The woman pushed the kerchief to one side and lowered herself gingerly in the chair.

The hall was air-conditioned; in fact the entire building was, but the throng corroded its efficacy. Smells of sweat and medicines mingled and became a regular feature of the general ambience. The woman thought that there was another smell,

swirling in this large area that was distinct from the rest. She had never experienced anything like this anywhere before though she was middle aged and had seen enough life. It was the smell of death ...death that tiptoed around; silently, stealthily. Today too, a stretcher was pushed close to the wall. The man lying in it was marking his time. Many tubes were jutting out of his veins, giving false hopes to his relatives while he himself prayed silently for his suffering to end.

The atmosphere was insufferably stifling. The fellow who had kept his kerchief on the chair had not yet returned. The woman felt somewhat guilty for appropriating someone else's seat and also a sense of insecurity. The man could come any minute. She will be obliged to vacate the seat. But won't he be leaving the seat himself as soon as the name of his ward was called out? We are all waiting for our respective calls; she thought ruefully. The hollowness that churned her stomach made her turn to the girl sitting next to her.

"Who is ailing?"

"My husband", the reply was as short as the question.

"Oh, you are married; don't look it at all. Your husband too, must be very young then. Tch tch". Her voice revealed genuine concern.

The girl heaved a sigh. Like a faint trace of lightening showing through the dense clouds her dark eyes glistened with tears. She kept quiet. Only her eyes spoke. So many people spoke at a time but no one heard anyone. Their hearts were heavy as lead; an unfathomable anxiety made them so. Every now and then in the midst of this queer mixture of din and quiet, the uniformed hospital guard, who, usually stood in the doorway, would come forward and call out a name on his mike. Patients who were done with their chemo for the day would have to be discharged and taken out by their attendants. Also their papers, complete with the date of next chemo, would be obtained from the medical counter. On some occasions the attendants would be

called because of some additional medicines that were required or some which were found missing from the prescribed kit. His booming voice would engulf the din that was there in the hall. From amongst the harassed looking faces the one whose name was called out would start and get up.

“Rokiya Khatun...Rokiya Khatun...” the mike rattled.

A tired looking, bearded man, wearing a coarse crumpled kurta looked this way and that. From his appearance he seemed to have come from some nearby village. But the magnificent metro city did house people who looked to have come from villages or small towns. They built plush offices and bungalows for the rich and powerful and pushed hand carts to give them easy access to fruit, vegetables and things required for day-to-day life. Recently the city was decked up like a bride as it was hosting the common wealth games. A whole lot of these people toiled day and night to make the place fit for those who would wallow in the luxury of five and seven star hotels. When their job was done, they were driven out of the precincts of the VIP areas, because if they were not, they would have looked like patches of leucoderma on the face of the bedecked bride. So it was not really easy to guess by physical appearance whether someone came from suburbs, or was living in the metro.

After waiting for, few seconds the guard left the mike on his stool and came right into the crowd. “Who is Rokiya Khatun, hurry up please. Why don’t you people heed the announcement. It is a sheer waste of time.” Though he was loud, his voice was laced with a kind of gentleness and sympathy.

In the same hospital, the nurses and ward boys of other departments were not as courteous and sympathetic. They explained the prescription and other related instructions only once and lost temper if further queries were made by the patient or their attendants. The usual retort was: “Are we here only for you? Can’t you see the crowd waiting for their turn?” A little more mumbling if the query was considered

stupid. Once an exasperated patient said, “Sir, wouldn’t it have been better to explain once more instead of chiding for so long?” Sir gave him a fierce look and moved away. The poor fellow went around asking people to tell him the number of times he had to take his medicines and when he had to come for his next injection. It took a lot of effort to find a person who was educated enough to read the prescription and also kind enough to explain. To some extent the staff had some excuse; they worked under great pressure and the poor folks who thronged this famous government hospital were mostly uneducated. They, sometimes, did give trouble to non-medic staffers. To begin with, the sheer number of people was a trial for their nerves. Conditions were same here too but the staff was exemplary in its dealings. They knew well that the patients who came here were booked for their journey beyond. Survival rate was very low, like that of grains which came out whole from the grinding stone. ‘No one can destroy the one whom God protects’; went a famous saying. But God protected very few from amongst those whom He afflicted with the dreaded disease.

Scooping a little girl with large, sad eyes in his arms, the bearded man got up. The emaciated girl was about three to four years old but looked still younger. “Yes, seems our turn has come. They want our little Ruqaiyya Khatoon.”

“Yes, yes, I meant that only. Hurry up.” The guard threw an affectionate glance towards the girl. Keeping the record file under one arm he held onto the child firmly and started walking in long strides. Even in his consternation he did not forget to plant a kiss on his little girl’s cheek and mutter under his breath, “Sister must be getting angry. I am late. I wonder how guard sir pronounces the names. I could not recognize my own child’s.”

“What a little beautiful girl she is,” the older woman commented. Some people lose words when they are unhappy

while some try to unburden themselves by talking. The woman was reticent by nature but in her agony she felt that her heart would burst if she did not give vent to her feelings.

The younger woman who was sitting with her head bowed looked up suddenly and blurted, "My daughter is almost the same age." Her voice betrayed tears.

"Oh, who is looking after her?"

"My mother. She lives in another city. Here because of her father's illness I could not look after her properly. She was rattling around, neglected. She had to be left in someone's care."

It seemed that in this alien land where everyone was preoccupied with their own plight, sympathy from unexpected quarters made the girl lose her cool. Tears rolled down her cheeks. Controlling herself she asked, "And who is ailing in your family?"

"My eleven year old son, he is here for chemotherapy."

The younger woman was shaken. For a woman it is difficult to decide who is more important for her, husband or children. She thought of her daughter whom she did not forget even for a moment.

"Where is your husband?" she wanted to carry on.

"He is with the child. Has taken him out for a while. Actually we came early. His chemo is scheduled for the second session." Silence again spread its wings between the two women. The hall reverberated with sounds.

After a long pause the older woman spoke again. "He is our only child, was born after twelve years of marriage. We had tried all kinds of treatment, visited shrines of all faiths, even magic potions and talismans; nothing happened. When all hopes were dashed and we resigned ourselves to God's will, the child happened out of the blue. We thought God had bestowed us with the most precious gift. But for what? To teach us the lesson that His will is supreme and

that we should not insist on something which has not been destined to us?"

The younger woman felt shaken from inside. Only child! That too after so many years of waiting. A precious child! But isn't every child precious? Her own daughter was left with her grandmother for better care.

The older woman continued. "We are strict vegetarians. But when doctors advised a high protein diet for him we started giving him non-vegetarian food. First we bought it from hotels but then we were cautioned against the quality, and hygienic way of cooking, so I started cooking at home. For the sake of the child the religion was cast aside. Now right from eggs to chicken I cook everything at home. To gain expertise I joined cookery classes. Thank God he relishes the dishes. I have the utmost gratification in looking after him, being at his disposal all the time. And I will keep on serving him as long as God grants me the pleasure of it", she spoke slowly but with emphasis on every word. Her voice did not betray any emotion though. Face too, remained expressionless. Her grief had reached the height where everything dissolves into nothingness, grief included.

The younger woman did not know how to react. As if unmoved by the misery of such magnitude she kept looking into the vacuum. The older woman pointed at two figures coming from the left. "There they are. Father and son. It is past twelve. Our turn should be coming in a while."

Now the younger woman looked at them coming. The child did not look sickly except for a yellow tinge in his dark eyes and a shaven head. He was tall for his age and hadn't lost his good build so far. Hair loss could be due to chemotherapy. Many a woman was seen with shaven heads covered with scarves. Another common sight was a mask to protect a body weakened with chemotherapy from any further infection. The woman felt a lump in her throat and looked the other way.

Just then the mike made a rattling sound. The guard holding it threw a cursory glance at the papers in hand and called out, “Akhil. Akil...oh not Akil, it is Akheel... attendants please come forward, Akheel’s attendants ...”

The older woman jumped to her feet. “Come child, your turn has come at last.”

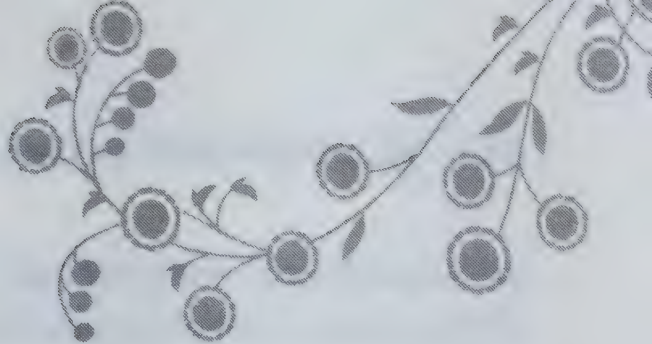
The younger woman too, got up with the same impatience. “No, he is asking for Aqeel’s attendant. Aqeel is my husband going through his chemo. Something must have cropped up, I wonder what.” She sounded alarmed. Not bothering about each other, both women took long strides and surged toward the guard. A bit confused, he looked at the papers again and said, “One at a time, please. Akhil’s attendants should come.” Controlling the stammer caused by confusion this time he had tried to pronounce as clearly as he could.

“Yes, it’s us, my Akhil, we had been waiting since early morning.” She held the hand of her young son and almost ran toward the door leading to the wing for treatment. The younger woman tried to fall in step. In fact, she wanted to reach first.

Who was it, Akhil Pandey or Aqeel Ahmad? Harassed and tired, the two women looked at the guard.

The usual uninterrupted bustle continued in the Day Care section of B.R. Ambedkar Cancer Hospital of All India Institute of Medical Science.





The Saga of Jaanki Raman Pandey



Somebody should have gone and inquired from this Jaanki Raman Pandey, Advocate, why in the name of God did he have to go to Rasoolpur and die there when he was doing so well in Allahabad? And die, not just figuratively, but literally. The common belief is that the time and place of a person's death are preordained (and also the time and place of some events more important than death, e.g., marriage). So why the fuss if one believes it has to be so? Well, what can one do? There are many wisecracks around, each smarter than the next. They say, "Of course, the Lord above has predetermined the time and place of death, but wouldn't you say something must be left for us humans to do too?" So whether we dump nine tons of soil on the dead body or douse it with kerosene – by the way, this practice of pouring kerosene on the living and incinerating them has also become quite fashionable these days – or feed it to kites and crows, well, that's our business. But brother, the crux of the matter is that a person only likes beliefs that accord with his own desires and convenience, otherwise he usually picks up a cudgel and goes after the offending ones. At least that's our belief. If you don't want to take my word, just look at how Pandey ji fared.

Pandey ji's whole story was told by K.K. Mama – the K.K. stood for Krishan Kaant, but he was mostly known by just those two initials. He'd given up appending his surname long ago. He used to say that in this kaljug, the period of crass

inhumanity and unmitigated evil, everyone has thrown all laws of proximity and abstinence overboard. Why, they have even started eating and drinking together. Be it a high-caste Brahmin or someone as lowly as a sweeper or tanner, they are all mixing freely. So why should he drag the name of his worthy ancestors through the mud? But Krishan Kant's disciples knew that all this posturing was merely a façade to hide the real K.K. He was hell-bent against caste differences. So purposely omitting his surname was really a sign of protest.

K.K. had perhaps no nephew of his own to call him 'Mama', but some wag had added the word Mama to his name. That stuck and he became everyone's Mama. He had spent quite some time in Lucknow, spoke fine Urdu, and was fond of telling stories. It was as though the spirit of some raconteur of the bazaar had been breathed into him – one time Jaanki Raman Pandey had himself expressed some such idea. Shifting the glob of paan from one cheek to the other with his tongue, and lifting his face up so the messy spittle didn't splatter on his audience, he'd talk in a peculiar, rounded, rolling tone. But what an enchanting storyteller he was! Not one person would even think of getting up to leave while he pulled yarn after yarn from his inexhaustible stock.

His chief audience consisted of the young men from his extended family, one or two neighbors, including Mirza Anwar Beg's wife Nayyara Beg, and perhaps a visitor or two who happened to be around. It seemed like Anwar Beg was the only person who was always pissed off by K.K. Mama. Calling him "a damned sissy," he would say, "talks like gossiping women – someone in the family is like this; another one is like that....."

Regardless of what Anwar Beg said, it never made the slightest dent in K.K.'s popularity. A crowd collected around him the minute he arrived, especially in winter when a heap of peanuts and steaming cups of tea would be on hand, a brazier of coals would be lighted, and K.K. Mama would sit in front

wrapped in a quilt looking every bit the clown. And thereafter, a cornucopia of delights, a paradise of absolute fun!

During one such winter session, he told the story of Jaanki Raman Pandey, the Advocate, who went to Rasoolpur and croaked there, creating quite a crisis. This is how the story went:

“When Pandey was small – and it was a long, long time ago that Pandey was small – his mother, known as Punditayin, passed away. She was the first cousin of my mother’s first cousin’s sister-in-law’s elder brother-in-law. There was, of course, the kinship, but there was also a close bond between the two families.”

“Was the bond just as close as the kinship, or more, or less?” Bipin Bhaiya had a habit of butting in, whether during a story or in real life.

“Well now brother, I haven’t invented any gadget for measuring closeness of relations. I can only tell you that we were quite close and the kinship was not inconsiderable either. And Mian, back in the old days, people used to end their letters with the P.S. “Regard my brief note as a full letter.....” And not just brief notes, they even regarded distant kinships as close kinships, and they steadfastly maintained those relationships. We’re like them too” K.K. said, striking his chest with his hand. Quite a bit of paan-spittle flew about and dissolved in the air. He wiped the edges of his mouth.

“I’m warning you, if you ever interrupt again in the middle”, Nayyara Beg scolded Bipin Bhaiya. She seemed to have acquired the right to scold everyone, including Anwar Beg.

“So, bitiya, when Pandey’s mother passed away, his father didn’t take long to find himself another wife. Well, that’s what people did in those days, if they felt the need, they didn’t even wait for the first wife to die. They went ahead and married again just like that. So if he did, it wasn’t like he had committed some grave sin. And especially when the old ladies in the family

kept goading, “Oh dear! Pundit, the poor motherless child is wasting away. Why don’t you remarry? How in the world are you going to raise a five-year-old child by yourself?”

A moment ago, Nayyara Beg had scolded Bipin Bihari for butting in; now she couldn’t hold back and blurted out, “What if the Pundit had somehow died? Would anyone have suggested to Punditayin that she get herself a new groom? Wouldn’t that have easily taken care of all the looking-after Pandey needed? Perhaps nobody gave a moment’s thought to how Pandey would be raised if his widowed mother stayed unmarried.”

“But it wasn’t like Pandey was raised by his mother. His father had remarried all right, but the Punditayin he brought home this time was only about a year younger than Pandey’s older married sister Uma.”

“Oh come on Mama! A year older or younger?” Nayyara Beg nudged him again.

“Now, Nayyara Bibi, the fact is that she was a year younger, but if you would rather, then call her a year older”, Mama again pushed the paan from one side of his cheek to the other.

“Mama, next time someone interrupts you give him a good whack”, Kaanti said. She was getting irritated by these constant interruptions of the story.

“Well, brother” Mama took out another pinch of flavored tobacco from the paan box and stuffed it in one of his cheeks, “I’m too old for whacking. Just listen to what happened later.” So, the daughter of Pundit ji, who had been married in Allahabad, was his eldest child. Actually she was named after the goddess Uma, but all the young men around called her Didda. She was about eighteen. She saw what was happening at her father’s place: how the new wife, with a tika emblazoned on her forehead, moved about everywhere in the house jingling her anklet bells, while her own father either stayed in the men’s quarter of the house or hung around the new mother rubbing his hands in anticipation of coming pleasures. So, no sooner had she

returned home, that she took to bed feigning illness and told her husband in no uncertain terms that she was going to have her little brother there with her, no matter what. A brother born after the death of three sisters, and the treatment he was getting from the stepmother! He craved a cup of milk and she wouldn't give him any even though two cows were tethered in the yard.

"When did I ever stop you from bringing him here?" her husband said. "You could just as well have asked in a simple, straightforward way. Why become a second Queen Kekai when you're my only wife?" And so on.

A beaming Didda went back the very next day and brought Pandey with her to her in-laws' place. The stepmother thought it was better that way; the less junk, the cleaner the place. Her anklet bells began to jingle a bit more.

Didda called Pandey "Bhaiyan" out of sheer love but treated him like a son, not a brother. Even after her own children came along, Bhaiyan's status didn't diminish. Those who didn't know the family well thought Bhaiyan was her first-born. Her husband, Onkaar Nath Mishra, also regarded him equally. He considered himself lucky to have found a wife such as Didda: in appearance fair and lustrous like a Brahmin, in honesty and fidelity a Rajput, in maintaining the household accounts and looking after the land and property a Vaisha, and in being ever ready to serve, a veritable Sudra. Onkaar doted on her. He took great care of her brother. Bhaiyan got an absolutely first-rate education.

Bhaiyan was in his graduating year when, to gratify her own desires, Didda went ahead and arranged his marriage.

K. K. Mama shifted in his seat and also rolled the paan in his mouth over to the other cheek, giving his narration a theatrical air. A respectful audience waited in hushed silence for the denouement to unfold.

"Now, brothers, understand that just after Didda arranged for the wedding, someone came and laid on Bhaiyan that the

girl was as dark as one could imagine. Bhaiyan's heart sank. Summoning up his sagging courage he approached Didda. She was sitting on the takht trying to figure out how much she needed to pay the washerman. That's when Bhaiyan, his eyes downcast, twisting the edges of his shirt, walking on tiptoe, stole behind her, so that he might not have to look straight into her eyes and yet say his piece."

"Didda", he said in a timid voice that was barely audible.

"Heaven's sake that cursed man broke the buttons again."

Bhaiyan was confused. Surely, when he was little, he did chew on the buttons of his shirt and shorts and was scolded by Didda, but now ... had he broken off another button?

"No, Didda. Where, show me?" He quickly began checking his buttons.

"Oh, it's you? What are you doing standing there? I was talking about that blasted washerman." She resumed counting, "Four dhotis, two sheets, one jacket."

"Didda", Bhaiyan breathed a sigh of relief as he scratched his head. "Yeah, what? Doesn't even worry about time; descends on you whether it is morning or evening."

Bhaiyan was nervous again. "All right Didda. I'll talk to you some other time."

"Not you, Bhaiyan, I was talking about that accursed washerman. Come sit. Come on. Why are you standing behind me?" She pushed aside the load the washerman had just delivered and made room for Bhaiyan. "Just look at his audacity. It's breakfast time and he shows up. Then he just dumps the washing and disappears." She mimicked the washerman, "Get the account ready; I'll be back after I'm done with my round of the neighborhood. Anyway, tell me, what do you want?"

"Didda ..."

Pandey again summoned up his courage and dropped what he thought was a bombshell.

“That girl from Mirjapur, well, people say she’s very dark, yet you went ahead and gave the word?”

“What!” The pencil and notebook fell from Didda’s hands. She had never in her wildest thoughts expected such shamelessness from Bhaiyan. She stared unbelievably at him, the one she had treated like a child from her own womb. Hadn’t she brought him here when he was hardly five years old? Hadn’t she looked after him? Given him an education? How dare he talk like that?

Actually, Pandey would have never had enough courage to say what he really wanted to. Ever since he’d heard talk of his marriage, a face as bewitching in its beauty as the moon had started flashing before his eyes, but then someone spilled black ink all over this image with the news. The prospect of waking up in the morning to an ugly, dark face right in front of him was truly soul crushing. Of course he couldn’t say all this. He could only bring himself to utter just one brief sentence, and even that hid more than it revealed.

“Listen, Bhaiyan” Didda said, slapping the pile of clean laundry, “It’s a courtesan whose appearance one worries about; if it’s a wife you want to bring into the house, you look at her family. And her family is one in a thousand. No one even eats onions or garlic in their house, let alone meat or fish. They’re nobler than the noblest. Add to this the fact that the young lady has also graduated from high school. Next Tuesday the girl’s people are coming for barichcha; the ceremony seals the alliance. But come to think of it, you have an exam coming up so you’d better go and concentrate on your studies. These matters are better left to your elders.”

Meanwhile Onkaar Nath Mishra, alias Bhaiyan’s brother-in-law, wandered in calling for his breakfast. He had overheard all the qualities of Bhaiyan’s bride-to-be. Solemnly he advised him, “Listen, young man. Go for the family now. Later on, when you get the chance, bring in one with a pretty face.”

Didda immediately drove her large, beautiful, questioning eyes right into her husband's. All the same, Pandey took his brother-in-law's advice to heart and happily, without any further ado, agreed to bring the 'Black Beauty' home.

A daughter-in-law, jingling her anklet-bells, alighted in Didda's courtyard even before her own first-born had wed.

Pandey loved Didda, as he ought to have, but he did not care any less for his kind brother-in-law. And rightly so. The man who had sired Pandey had never even once looked back to inquire after him. Whatever he had, came from this brother-in-law alone. And because he was a lawyer, he was now giving Pandey a legal education. Bhaiyan would get good training in his own house, he would say. Apprenticeship under an established lawyer would give Pandey's own practice a head start. There was no way he could possibly ignore the word of such a godlike brother-in-law, was there? So, a few years after his law education, when his practice was flourishing and he had become completely independent, he brought home one with a pretty face.

At this point in the story, K. K. Mama paused, heaving a deep sigh, and asked again for some hot tea. He'd made a dramatic pause in the narration, which only caused his audience's interest to soar.

During the pause Bipin Bhai Sahib laughed uproariously, enough to rattle the roof, and said, "Why, we all know that the one with the pretty face was a musalmanti. But how and where he had met her, that only Mama will be able to say."

Mama once again rolled the betel glob from one cheek to the other and carefully held up the spittle in his mouth.

"Mama, why don't you go and spit it out?" one listener objected. "Quiet, you!" he got the answer from another one. "Let the tea come and let Mama freshen up a bit."

It didn't take long for tea to arrive. Nanyara Bibi poured it in all the cups, scowled at Bipin and said to him, "For this

musalmanti bit, I'll deal with you a little later. For now let me hear Mama's story."

"How many times have I heard that before, Nayyara Bhabi? So forget about your threats of dealing with me", Bipin challenged. "Haven't I asked you a hundred times to find me a ravishing musalmanti like you? But why would you bother! Now I'm going to fall in love with you. Damn the luck of that son of a gun Anwar! As some old master has said: a houri in the lap of a black-faced monkey ..."

Nayyara sloshed a bit of hot tea on Bipin's neck, "You wretched hin-duchchey, you!"

After spitting out the glob of paan and rinsing his mouth, Mama once again picked up the thread of the story as he slurped his tea. The listeners were sipping their tea too.

"Was there anything the people shied away from saying about her? Even called her a slut. But that wasn't the case, nor was the Pretty's family mediocre or lowly. As for musalmanta or musalmanti, just look at our Nayyara Bibi now and tell me for sure whether she's a Hindu or a Muslim. Just try. No one goes around wearing his or her religion or caste on their sleeve. And, folks, if it were up to me, I would have all the religions in the world banned. Nothing has created so much dissension and discord among people as ..."

The intensity of passion and anger in his last sentence left everyone stunned for a moment.

Then he calmed down again, as people often do after a flare up. Pandey's brother-in-law Pundit Onkaar Nath Mishra, Advocate, had a faithful and loyal old scribe named Munshi Rajab Ali, just slightly older than Onkaar Nath. Rajab Ali's father, Imtiaz Ali, had been affiliated with Onkaar Nath's household ever since his father's time. He was responsible for looking after their entire property. As a manager, he was scrupulously honest. He got his son educated and so Onkaar Nath took him into his employ as scribe. Didda used to call

him Brother Rajab Ali Sahib. Whenever Imtiaz Ali came to visit, she would draw her mantle over her face and touch his feet in a gesture of respect, but she wouldn't eat at his house. "This was the time, folks, when people showed warm affection whether they would eat at the other's place or not. Nowadays, it's the opposite: people eat together but their hearts are far apart, devoid of goodwill and affection. What a shame!" Mama took out another folded paan from the betel box.

The dietary prohibition applied only to cooked foods and liquids. They didn't extend to uncooked or dry stuff, such as paan, tobacco or fruit, etc. So at Eid time, when the gift tray arrived from Rajab Ali's, it only contained uncooked vermicelli, spiraling dry vermicelli, dry fruit, sugar, and lo and behold, some crisp bank notes to buy milk along with Eidi money in small individual envelopes for all the young ones in the family. Everything was placed on a new round copper salver. The food, including the salver, was presented to Didda, prompting her to say every time, "What, Brother Rajab Ali Sahib, a brand new platter again? We have no prohibition about dishes in which food is neither cooked nor eaten. Go bring an old platter and take this one back." But Rajab Ali wouldn't even hear of that. After he passed away, Didda often heaved a deep sigh and said wistfully, "All the platters are lying in the storeroom. Go count them and you'll know how many Eids we spent together."

The same Rajab Ali had a much older, widowed sister. Her own daughter had died while still young, leaving a little girl behind. The girl's father remarried. Rajab Ali brought the widowed sister and her grand-daughter home. As he had no daughter of his own, he loved the girl very much and married her off with much fanfare. Didda too had sent a gift of clothes and such for the bride. Later it became known that the girl's husband suffered from some mental ailment. Eventually the grief of having to seek divorce for his dear grand-daughter killed Rajab Ali prematurely. The girl returned home. A silence

had swept over her. The minute Pandey set eyes on her, he went berserk. He felt as if the sun was shining right above his head, melting away his brain. He had gone to Rajab Ali's to offer condolences and the girl had somehow walked straight into his presence – the portrait of a forlorn face, eyes streaked with red. He was getting along in years: many lovely faces had passed by him, but never before had he lost his heart like that.

Well, Pandey started visiting the house frequently, apparently out of regard for Rajab Ali and his unflinching loyalty. He showered them with gifts of all kinds. Poor Rajab Ali's wife was a simple, naïve woman. The trauma of her husband's untimely demise combined with the misery the poor girl was going through made her almost witless. For some time she had no idea what was happening. And as for Didda, she wouldn't even notice what season of the year it was. By the time she woke up, the water was already well above her head. Bhagwan, hai Bhagwan!

"What is all this that I'm hearing, Bhaiyan?" She confronted him. Bhaiyan was dead silent, unable to say a word.

"Why don't you open your mouth? In the whole wide world you could only find this one – a Muslim, and a divorcee to boot?"

And when no response was forthcoming, "Am I talking to a stone or something?" Didda actually began to cry now.

Love is known to turn even the smartest people into perfect idiots. When Didda kicked up more fuss, Pandey, who some years ago had very quietly succumbed to his sister's choice and gone through the seven rounds of the holy fire, was provoked to say – though he spoke very respectfully – "Didda, you're like a mother to me. If she were alive today, I couldn't have given her as much respect as I give you. I saved your face and your good name when you went and made a decision about my life without asking me. I honored it with my heart and soul. My first one is the principal wife; that will not change. But this one is my love; that will also not change."

Didda was speechless. Yes indeed, Bhaiyan had answered back to her. That left no room at all for further discussion.

“Bravo Bhaiyan Sahib! You turned out to be quite gutsy!” clamored someone in the audience. “And what do we have here? Our Bipin Bhaiya. The girl didn’t even belong to another religion; just a different caste. His mother gives a slight rebuke and there he goes running to hide under her mantle.”

“Shame, shame!” a collective cry shot up.

“Go smear dung on the faces of those who talk about the generation gap. Why must anyone malign today’s people? Those older ones weren’t any different.”

Bipin Bhaiya went completely numb, as if a serpent had sniffed him. Observing the doleful look on his face, someone came to his rescue: “OK Mama. Something more must have happened afterward, eh?”

Whatever happened afterward was all the handiwork of the heavens above – neither Didda, nor Pandey, nor the one from Mirjapur had anything to do with it. Before he married his Pretty Face, Pandey already had two daughters, about five or six years old. But within a year of his second marriage, he had a son, followed by another son, while his first wife again gave birth to a girl, their third. Didda couldn’t hold herself back anymore. She went to congratulate her sister-in-law with traditional fanfare, gave her a pair of priceless earrings, a family heirloom, as a gift, and was overjoyed to see the faces of the nephews glowing like the sun and the moon. When their beautiful young mother bowed slightly and raised her hand to greet her, Didda responded with words like “May you be blessed with many children and prosper”, and accepted a roll of betel leaf from her hands – the betel box was always kept ready because of Pandey.

After Didda returned home she arranged for a puja session in honor of Lord Sat Narayan, customarily held to mark auspicious occasions such as this one. Then, taking along a share of the

propitiatory offering, the prashad, she went back to the house of the same sister-in-law who belonged to another religion. She didn't explain anything, just offered it to her. The young lady smiled and accepted it gracefully in her two cupped hands, the way prashad is taken. ("Oh, the wretch! How pretty she is! Her hands look like they're made from silver", Didda thought to herself.) Then she raised her cupped hands to touch her forehead in a gesture of respect and gratitude and consumed what was in them. (Didda thought, "Lord, what a dutiful and respectful girl!") Then after a pause Didda said, "With Bhaiyan by your side, the two of you look like Ram and Sita. From today, I shall call you Jaanki. You do know, don't you, that Sita's other name was Jaanki? And besides, it is also part of your husband's name."

Raushan Aara smiled. ("What's in a name?" Shakespeare declaimed centuries ago. But then some bright spirits subjected his own name to their ingenuity and came up with "Sheikh Peer".)

The couple had named their boys Aamir and Saabir. Didda changed them to Amar and Subir and, after incorporating everyone into her family by giving them Hindu names, returned home. Thus she filled up the entire yawning gulf in one minute flat. Even the Lord Hanuman's army wouldn't have built a bridge between Sri Lanka and India in such a short time. However, the fallout from all this activity didn't turn out to be entirely propitious. The "one with the big family name" whom Didda had brought home with such eagerness felt offended and started to distance herself from her. Now, folks, such mother – and daughter-in-law tiffs are fairly common in every family, though they're kept somewhat hushed in respectable homes.

"Yes, fellows, take the case of Princess Anne and Lady Diana. They never could get along well."

"Bravo! There you go rushing straight off to England! Why forget our native Safdar Jang Road?"

From Pandey, the conversation had drifted to political figures and their relatives. Tea with peanuts and a session of backbiting lasted a long time. (Both give a lot of pleasure in winter, as famously said by Mushtaq Yusufi.) The fun lasted quite some time.

Such sessions still took place, but they had somehow lost their earlier zing. K.K. Mama, at fifty-five (in his own view, the prime of his life) was struck with cancer and two years later was no more. The protagonist of his story hadn't aged much either. Likely he was sixty, or just a little older, but he still had a muscular body. There was no sign that he would croak anytime soon. It didn't look as if a single brick in that stout frame would come loose before he was eighty or eighty-five, let alone the whole edifice crashing down. But yes, Didda had passed away and the girls had grown, so the pressure of Pandey's first wife had increased on him. Even when he went to the Pretty Face's, he didn't stay long and came running back. But this time when he went to her he made up for all the lost time; settled all his past and future accounts. He died there. Just like that, suddenly. K.K. Mama was no longer around or he would have pontificated. Now, folks, you never can tell when someone will fall in love, nor is there a fixed time for a dust storm, a wedding or a death. Sometimes all these happen so suddenly it's hard to believe. Here, try to figure it out: Pandeyji was perfectly fine at home; why the heck did he have to go to Rasoolpur to die? Granted, *she* lived there, his favorite wife. But if he hadn't gone there at that time, he might not have died. Or he might have died but at least not there.

When Pandey was making Raushan's life miserable by insisting that she marry him, she told him one day, "But Pundit (that's how she addressed him, always), you and I belong to different religions. On top of that, you're married and the father of two daughters. You may well claim a thousand times to be ready to die for me but ..."

“Oh, religion ... yes”, Pandey took a deep breath and scratched his head. “Granted, about that there is no doubt: you’re a Muslim, I’m a Hindu. But why drag my being married into it? Your religion allows four wives, doesn’t it?”

Raushan Aara smiled, “And yours puts no ceiling at all. Four or forty.” Pandey became irritated, “The damned government does now. There was this ancestor of mine who, when there was no such law, married four real sisters, one after another. And when the stock ran out in that family he got himself a courtesan. But there’s no restriction on you.”

Raushan Aara glowered menacingly, “Of course, there is. On me, that is. Not on men of our community. By the way, Pundit, what do you take me to be?”

“Jaan-e Pundit, the love of my life.”

“The Persian genitive, that ‘-e’ does not go well with a typical Hindi word. Like the two of us together. Looks downright awkward, odd.”

“Raushan Aara, keep it up and one of these days you’ll get a fine beating.” Raushan Aara suddenly tensed and her face became grim, “Oh yes, I’ve been beaten all right, like a poor pawn on life’s chessboard. What do I do now, Pundit?” Without thinking, she began rubbing her hands together. Her voice betrayed a feeling of utter helplessness.

“You don’t have to do anything. Just marry me, without fussing.”

“In that case, you’ll have to change your faith. No court marriage for me. No sir.”

“There will be no court marriage anyway. The one from Mirjapur is at home, isn’t she? How would I deny having married her?”

“So, you are going to have me as a ‘keep’? Is that it?”

Now it was Pandey’s turn to become deadly serious. Could one possibly pile such disgrace upon the woman he has loved so dearly, so helplessly? For a moment he was speechless.

“Come on, Pundit. Speak up.” Her tone insisted on a categorical answer. “I will go through the nikah”, he said with certainty.

“You’ll have to change your religion. You know that, eh?”

“So now you are going to teach a lawyer, Raushan Aara Begum? You, a woman, whose intelligence, as the elders say, resides in her ankle?”

“We’ll decide later whose intelligence resides in the ankle. First, you’d better be aware that the path is pretty rocky. To abandon the religion of one’s ancestors ...”

“To hell with it”, Pandey bit his lips.

“What are you sending to hell – religion or the ancestors?”

“The society that created the religion. But, of course, your religion is descended from the heavens.”

“Right now, you’re a Hindu so you may say whatever you like. Once you accept Islam, you’ll not be allowed to show any disrespect.”

That night when he went home and laid down next to his wife, Pandey couldn’t fall asleep. He lit a cigarette and went to sit on the verandah. Didda hadn’t let him move away from her house even after he started making his own money. She only moved him to a newly built, cottage-like bungalow in the empty lot – an extension of her own house – just so that her brother’s ego wouldn’t be wounded and he wouldn’t become the object of people’s gossip on account of living in his sister’s house. The two houses had a joint compound. A trained gardener under Didda’s own supervision made improvements to the garden. Some trees were so beautiful their leaves looked prettier than their blossoms. The breeze filtering through them felt a bit more refreshing. The moon hung like a chandelier in the middle of a clear blue sky. Pandey just sat there smoking cigarettes. The fragrance of molsiri hung about him like some magic spell overpowering the odour of tobacco.

There was still some time before dawn. He got up and started walking toward Didda's house. Huge white musandas stood lining one edge of the lawn. The story is told how in one of his incarnations Gautama Buddha was wandering in the forests of Sri Lanka. It was a moonless night and he was groping his way forward when suddenly row upon row of flowers opened and a glow spread through the musandas. The whole forest was bathed in a cool luminescence. A milky white light spread all over – light not of the moon, but of the flowers. Then Gautama Buddha blessed the musanda plant. The blessing is still effective: the shrub flowers year-round. God knows whether it is a psychological effect of the story or whether the flowers themselves have some innate quality, but somehow calm descends upon one's mind and heart when looking at them. Could it be the result of Gautama Buddha's blessing? And did the Buddha not pray for the human race to be blessed with common sense? That the dross be eliminated from man's heart? And man cleansed of his innate evil? Spared old age, sickness and the cycle of deaths and rebirths? They all continue to afflict mankind and are still filling man's heart with terror. Mother, my dear mother.

Pandey's eyes welled up with tears as the thought of his beautiful mother who had died so young came sailing into his mind. An excruciating sigh rose from his heart at this hour of the waning night. Where would Mother have gone after dying? Would she really have to cross the Vaitarini River as the Scriptures say? Were there any other worlds beyond this one? Would Pandey ever be able to see her again after his own death? The mother who always carried her little Jaanki Raman close to her heart when she was alive – would she be yearning for him now? Would the pind daan, the ritual charity and puja offered for the peace of the departed souls really bring peace to them? Yes, soul? What is this soul?

(Raushan Aara, too, when she said the faatiha for Munshi Rajab Ali, said his soul received peace and reward from this.) What are gunaaah and sawaab, the sin and the reward for virtue? Raushan had never let him kiss her, only allowed him to touch her fingers. “This is sinful” was her favorite expression, which she used time and time again. (“But then, Raushan Bibi, according to your beliefs, meeting me, to even make this attraction between a man and a woman possible, is sinful.”) Who had made these standards for sin and for reward? Restless, he had begun walking fast. If he recited the kalima and claimed he was a Muslim, would he still remain Jaanki Raman Pandey or would he become someone else? He decided, no, he would remain the same, with all his knowledge, his awareness, his legal hairsplitting, his body, shape, appearance, his feelings and sensations, his thoughts, his wickedness, his defects, all his loves ... The name Jaanki Raman Pandey had everything and then again, nothing.

His loves? He had two daughters and a wife. He had never felt the kind of attachment or stormy feelings for his wife as he did for Raushan Aara. What about Didda and his daughters? Would his love for them diminish or disappear entirely just because he stuck a new label on himself? “How could that be Jaanki Raman Pandey?” he reproached himself. Then, what was all the fuss about? And whose fuss was it?

The following week he went to Raushan Aara and told her he was ready to recite the kalima, to convert.

“But Raushan” he said to this quiet, bright-faced woman with droopy eyelids, “I am Vishnu’s devotee; I may not be able to pluck him out of my heart. You might as well know that all these names, these conceptions – people have devised them at different times just to answer their own basic questions: Who made this world? Why do people die? Where do they go after dying? What awaits them there? Is there any recompense for all the injustice and suffering in the world? Those whom no

law can prosecute, will they get their just deserts somewhere? Is there any reward for those who do good? As it is, Raushan Begum, the world is rife with sin and oppression. If there were no religion, it would be flooded by them. Religion at least sets limits around the devils residing within us; it gives human beings strength and courage during their suffering and crises; it keeps hope alive.”

“And this ‘Insha-Allah’ you keep repeating so often ... and ‘Masha-Allah’ to protect yourself from evil—that Allah of yours Who is merciful and forgiving, Who preserves and cherishes, Who condones sins as well as punishes for them, Who sustains life and promises death – well, my Vishnu has all those attributes too. It’s just that we view Him in three separate forms -- Creator, Sustainer, and Destroyer. They’re all facets of the same supreme Being.”

He smiled. “Your Allah is the Lord of all the worlds, not merely the Lord of Muslims. So... in that sense, He is mine as well. He was mine even before, but now I will declare Him openly as mine. And it is through His good offices that I shall be holding your hand. But the manner in which I have been worshipping Him in the past is not going to change. It will remain the same.”

He remained quiet for a short while. Then lowering his eyes a bit he said, “And Raushan Begum...one other thing: I cannot give up my wife, or daughters, or Didda. My wife, such as she is, I have married her with all the proper rituals. My entire society is behind her. None of them can be made to sacrifice for one relationship.”

He paused again, and this time smiled a little. “And don’t you give me the example of King Edward of Mrs. Simpson fame. He was a king, and a king of England at that. I’m just a common man, a member of the hoi polloi, victim of the most complicated caste-driven landscape of India.”

Holding her beautiful face in the cup of her hands, listening attentively to Pandey's lecture, Raushan smiled – a painful, troubled smile.

“Pundit, when I was handing over my heart to you, I hadn't considered that you were Jaanki Raman Pandey and I was Raushan Aara. By the time I discerned the difference between the names, it was already too late. You may do whatever you like. Only lift your finger and say the kalima. I cannot accept any other manner of being with you except after nikah. I won't even ask you to become a non-vegetarian.”

Then she spoke with a trace of anger, “Whenever you come here, I'll feed you the fodder for the cows and oxen. And, may I eat pig's meat if I ever contemplate encroaching upon the rights of your wife. About coming here, you may do so whenever you want, and stay only as long as it does not upset your peace of mind.”

They were married the next week. Before the nikah, Jaanki Raman Pandey converted to Islam in the presence of a meek-faced, frightened-looking maulvi. At the time of the nikah, Raushan's maternal grandmother, that is, Rajab Ali's wife, was terribly sad and upset. Her concern wasn't that Raushan was marrying a Hindu. What pained her more was how she would now face Onkaar Nath's wife. How she would send the Eid vermicelli to her house. The relationship between the families went back a long way. Was theirs the only house left to burglarize? In any case, Jaanki Raman Pandey was a man, no one was going to say anything to him. And even though it wasn't love-at-first-sight for Raushan, nor did she try to find excuses for him to make repeated visits or try to contact him – as a matter of fact in the beginning she was quite suspicious of his comings and goings – at that time she was passing through a delicate and very painful period. Caution escaped her when she found attention and love. But who would even stop to notice or

listen to all of this, or ask for explanations. And, indeed, no one said anything to Jaanki Raman. They all pounced on Raushan.

A harlot. A dissolute woman. Abandoned her first husband. Does anyone ever hit a pretty woman like her? Must be a tramp, that's why she got beaten. And then blamed it all on him for being crazy. She'd never let him come near her, that's why she couldn't even beget a mouse in three years of marriage. And then, as soon as she marries Pandey, out comes a son. Who knows, she might have been carrying on with Pandey the whole time. (Pandey wasn't even remotely aware of her existence in those days.) A whore. Didn't even worry about what is permitted and what is not. She is corrupting a Brahmin's faith; she'll go straight to hell. Who knows, even hell may not find a place for her. Lord knows what she feeds him. Then one day, tired of people's jibes and what she herself thought, the first wife told Pandey, "You eat *there*; separate your pots, pans and dishes from ours. Don't eat here in ours."

Pandey always treated his first wife very courteously. Who knows how he had defended himself in other matters or what shrewd counseling he had given her, but on this issue of eating, he brought out the Holy Gita, put his hand on it and swore, "When I stay there, my food is cooked in separate pots, on a separate stove. During those days, she herself does not eat meat, fish, onion or garlic. It's a purely vegetarian fare."

The Mirjapur woman would burn hearing him use the plural, respectful form of 'she' for Raushan. But Pandey, swearing with his hand on the Gita, looked so pitiful, so innocent, so disarmingly truthful that afterward she gave up squabbling about what was lawful to eat and what wasn't.

Pandey did swear at that time, but ever since that day, he began feeling troubled in his mind. This was the first time he'd had to go to that extent to prove his honesty. He felt as if he was no longer the lawyer, but the culprit standing in the dock. He was reminded of the episode in the Ramayana in

which Sita has to go through the trial by fire. He would sit brooding long hours over what this business of halal, haram, khadiya, akhadiya, lawful to eat, or unlawful to eat was. One could eat meat, the other couldn't. The other could eat meat, but not pig's meat or cow's. Even in vegetarian food, there was a prohibition about onions and garlic, as there was in Pandey's own house. On the other hand, Didda's sons had started having onion pakoras fried in their house. Because of the same issue among Didda's in-laws, they had to separate their cooking. A family that had held together for generations was now split apart.

A melancholy feeling had settled over Didda's elder brother-in-law, because one of his sons had fallen in with bad company and had started eating meat. His wife was the daughter of some naval officer, and so quite upbeat and outgoing. Not only did she not reprimand her husband, she encouraged him. The food already had an excess of onions and garlic in it. At first the matter stayed in restaurants. Later, as restraint relaxed a little, biryani and chicken started arriving in the lunch boxes. Such indignity in the house of a high-ranking Brahmin! Ram! Ram! The two brothers fought openly. The older one was a little orthodox in his views and loved his father dearly. If all of this hadn't happened while he was alive, it might not have mattered that much. So the older one made his younger brother live separately. A huge two-storied home was divided into two households. The parents moved in with the older son and daughter-in-law. After the hearths were separated, all the issues that had been ignored earlier suddenly became contentious. One day, a lighthearted joke turned into a serious argument. "Bhabi" the younger brother said to the older sister-in-law, "try a chicken drumstick sometime and you'll start eating whole men, not just chicken." She screamed so hard that the entire household promptly gathered. The spat became so heated that the division of the estate and property was dragged

in. (Actually, the older brother's wife had been contemplating the matter of the division of property for some time already. The fight provided a handy excuse to bring it up.)

How stupid man is! How long will he stay that way?

Wasn't Raushan Aara herself saying the other day that her mother never mentioned the word pig? She referred to it as 'the bad one' or 'haram-faced.' Her logic was that if one mentioned the word 'pig', the angels that brought blessings wouldn't enter one's house.

"And Bibi Raushan Aara, you're the people who eat chicken, goat, cow, buffalo, even camel and horse. Why so much fuss over a poor pig?"

"I never eat camels or horses", Raushan fidgeted a bit. "And beef – that you made me give up."

"But they are considered halal at any rate. Aren't they? Baddan Mian, remember, that distant relation of yours? Didn't he slaughter a camel to celebrate the birth of a son born after six daughters? And didn't he send a share of the meat to your house? Poor daughters! No one sacrifices even a measly goat when they're born, much less a whole camel." And Pandey added, "You may go on claiming that a woman's status is very high in Islam, but there is a clash everywhere between the beliefs of religion and society."

"When did I eat camel meat?"

"The same silly argument! It's halal, isn't it? Your co-religionists eat it, don't they, whether you personally do or don't?"

"Right now you're the one making silly arguments. You sound like a broken record."

"It's stuck because you never told me why you people fret so much about the pig. Remember, once you even swore that if you ever think of usurping the rights of my wife, you'll eat pig's meat."

"Maybe because it looks so dirty and nauseating."

“It looks the same to me as well. Maybe it does even to others. But why does it occupy such a negative place in your psyche? It’s stupid to shy away from it so much. It is haram, just as a donkey or a dog is. Maybe because nobody eats a donkey or a dog, but people do eat pigs, that’s why the idea has somehow stuck in your brains. What a shame! But when you people are angry, why do you swear by saying ‘Eat a pig!’ not ‘Eat a donkey’ or ‘Eat a dog?’”

“I’ve never thought about the logic. You go ahead if you wish.” Raushan Aara scowled, “Seems as if you want to kick up a riot inside the house, eh? Haven’t you done enough outside?” Pandey laughed heartily.

Recently, they had escaped a riot by a hair’s breadth. Some mischief-maker had thrown a sack of meat into the mosque. No one had it tested by a lab to find out what kind it was, everyone just assumed it had to be from a pig because it was thrown inside a mosque. Pandey was ahead of everybody in reasoning with the enraged youth and calming them down. He had come to Raushan and was present in Rasoolpur at that time.

“Look, you can’t win over the majority by fighting. An ordinary mistake will cause great harm to your people. Have some patience and don’t let such small things get to you.”

“You call it a small thing?” Raushan had snapped.

“Small in the sense that a person could easily pick up the sack and throw it out, fill up buckets of water and cleanse the floor. End of story. The ones who wanted to benefit by inciting you would then be left to wallow in total embarrassment.”

But it took all his powers of persuasion and a lot of time to make them understand this small thing. Picking up the sack himself, Pandey dumped it in the garbage and made entreaties to the imam of the mosque with folded hands. The situation had become quite volatile. Finally, with tremendous difficulty, he was able to avert a major incident. (How could there be a

major incident anyway? Have Muslims got the spunk for it? If they so much as even make a peep, you guys beat them up and knock some sense into their heads. You confiscate their graveyards and threaten to send them to their graves too.) “But we’re not about to pack up and go to Pakistan”, Raushan had commented. The Babri Mosque issue was also pretty hot at the time. Somebody had also scribbled a rhymed couplet on Raushan’s wall: “two places left for Mussalmans: the graveyard or Pakistan.”

Raushan was in a daze. Her face looked as if she was oblivious to everything around her. And indeed she was. Her long hair, which Pandey had undone the night before and spread over his shoulders, was still in the same disheveled state, now even a bit tangled. Dark circles had appeared under her eyes. It seemed as if someone had filled those eyes, which even now had lost none of their brilliance, with bewilderment —bewilderment at the unexpected that had struck her. Her mind refused to accept it. In one corner of her mind, the scorpion of an idea had been stinging her: why did Pandey have to be with her when death came? (And if he had been at that other place perhaps she would have been jolted by a different shock, the inability to see his face as he lay dying.) God knows what everyone in that other house must be thinking.... And then again, both of his sons were here. All the people of the area had gathered too.

Pandey was well liked in the area. Raushan did not know quite how to tell them that her husband was not a Muslim, that his last rites should be performed according to the Hindu faith. (The whole village was a Muslim settlement. There were just a smattering of Brahmin and Rajput households and a few tanners’ huts at the edge of the village.) But could Pandey fit easily into a single category? Which one? And whose?

Once, a long time ago, when he had let Raushan’s head rest against his chest while he leaned back moving his fingers through her long curls, she had said, “Pundit, you’re such a

hypocrite! You even said the Juma prayer in the mosque. Tell me truthfully, what did you actually recite, Gayatri Mantar or Hanumaan Chaleesa?”

Pandey laughed, “I’ve memorized all seven kalimas, and even the Al-Hamd. I just recited those, switching them around a few times, and did the standing up and sitting down as the others were doing.” Then suddenly he became serious. “Have you ever seen the chicken being spoiled when too many cooks butt in?”

“What makes you think of chicken all of a sudden, Pundit? Like to eat some?”

“Raushan” Pandey was still serious, “I used to be a simple, unpretentious Hindu. I got mixed up with you and became a fake Muslim. Then I didn’t even stay a true Hindu. I have become a complete heretic, what you might call an atheist.”

Raushan jerked her hair away suddenly and sat up. “Don’t talk nonsense. I’m going to serve the food now.” She moved toward the kitchen and saw Pundit following her. He came over and stood leaning against the stove.

“Raushan, before, I never felt the need to think much about God and religion. I just figured there was someone who nourished us, so I did my duty toward Him by going through the evening prayer. I’d heard a lot of criticism about the other religions around and I also believed my religion was the best. Then I looked at the world carefully. After meeting you, I tried to understand your faith. I was just a lawyer in the beginning. All I ever knew was the law. Then I developed an interest in religion and studied a lot of subjects – history, sociology, anthropology, religion, and so on. And now Raushan, I’ve gone beyond all the boundaries, whether overt or covert.”

“Listen Pundit”, Raushan said as she emptied gourds filled with gram lentils from the pan into a beautiful deep dish, “Don’t take my jokes seriously. By God, I haven’t let your religion

bother me at all. You mean everything to me just as you are, a human being who has given me all his love and security.”

“I know that Raushan. And I haven’t loved you just for your looks either. It’s also because of your intelligence, your wit, your deep understanding, and your innate nobility. I looked for all these qualities in my wife but couldn’t find them. That’s what drew me to you.”

“But right now I’m in the mood to tell you something. I have a deep sense that in every epoch or age, all the secrets and mysteries of the universe, all the ups and downs of life, like old age, death, suffering and the like, have produced in humans of all races and colors, the conception of a Being that controls the whole of this intricate puzzle we call life. That Being is someone affectionate like a father, above every need. Someone we expect to support truth and oppose falsehood, someone always awake, watching over every creature. Someone from whom we can ask anything and everything. To please him, to avoid his wrath, we also formulate the concepts of sawaab and gunaah. Basically, sawaab are deeds that benefit others and gunaah are those that cause them harm.”

For a short while he stared at the gas flames flickering on the stove.

Then he continued: “But while doing all this, what we forgot, was that it is quite natural for people’s conceptions to vary in different regions, in different times, and according to their different ways of life, even though the basic objective is still the same. All religious systems ultimately take a person in the same direction – toward the Omnipotent Being who created the universe and has control over life and death. But we only consider the system we ourselves follow as correct. We declare everyone who falls outside our own system as fit for beheading. And then we split up the basic gunaah and sawaab into a hundred different categories that make no sense at all.”

Raushan placed the rice dish on the tray with deep sorrow and said, "Among those sins is also the one I have committed: marrying the follower of another religion. Pundit, I know, you agreed to embrace Islam only to make the nikah legally permissible."

"That is correct, Raushan, but I too believe in one God. My ancient Hindu faith tells me the same thing. And I also respect your Prophet immensely. He was a great revolutionary reformer. No person has been born since who could win over such large numbers of people and bring about such tremendous, positive changes in his community."

"And you're still not a Muslim?"

"I just told you, didn't I? I'm not even a Hindu any longer. I'm just a human being who sees God's glory in everything – in the chirping of the sparrows, the fragrance of the flowers, the open spaces, the scattered stars of the galaxy, in the waters of the rivers and the beauty of the rising and setting sun. Perhaps that's why our thinkers and philosophers started to worship the sun and the trees and the rivers. These are all manifestations of God's divine power."

"And I also concede every individual's right to his own religion and personal beliefs. How he wants to reach his God is his business alone. But it's also true that no other issue besides religion has resulted in the creation of so many walls and so much iniquity among mankind. After the discovery of America, when the Spaniards arrived in the New World, they didn't just bring gunpowder and smallpox for the natives, they also brought a new God. Surely, it must have been hard for the natives to adjust to this new God; it must have taken some time for them to forget the souls of their ancestors, whom they had worshipped, and not to grieve over the mass slaughter of their sacred buffaloes. The German tribes used to worship oak trees; the Catholic missionaries had them chopped down."

“And forgive me for saying that there’s a lot of emphasis on missionary work in your religion too. From what I know about Islam, although it wasn’t spread by the sword alone, the Islamic conquests did play an important role. The vanquished have always found safety in adopting the faith of the victor. The cultural and religious influences of the conquerors gradually supplant those of the confused or at least usher in a lot of change.”

“And you Hindus beat up the Buddhists and drove them away, didn’t you? You razed their temples to the ground and gobbled up Mahatma Buddha by assimilating him in the Hindu pantheon of gods as the ninth incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Nice trick to put an end to the Buddhist faith”, Raushan said in a huff. Then she laughed and added, “But I, a Muslim, have a great reverence for Gautama Buddha. All right, weed-eater, enough sermonizing. Come, your meal is served.”

“Raushan Begum, your Mahatma Buddha vigorously opposed idol-worship, and not just that, *he* also opposed the entire gamut of Hindu ceremonial acts and sacrificial rites. And what did his followers do? They installed idols of him everywhere in the world; they started doing all the things he had opposed. The fact is mankind needs a God, especially one they can see. It’s very difficult to worship an unseen God like the one you have. That requires a profound metaphysical understanding rarely found in human beings. But of course, with a cudgel in hand a person quickly learns how to smash it hard on another’s head and beliefs. To overcome the nasty devil hiding inside man ... now take those magnificent statues at Bamiyan, your Taliban ...”

Now Raushan really got angry, “Why are the Taliban mine? Because they share my religion, is that it? My head sinks in shame when I think of it. No conqueror in Afghanistan ever touched those Buddhas, not even Mahmud, the one famous for being an iconoclast. There’s been so much progress, but man hasn’t learned to be human. Why should someone who is

wrong, narrow-minded, an enemy of history be called *mine*?" Sadness mingled with indignation in her voice.

"All religions were originally different than what their followers subsequently made them into. All right, tell me something" Pandey asked, laughing, "when I die, which religion will you follow for my last rites? Oh brother, I'm truly terrified of being buried under the dirt. Those two angels of yours, the Munkar Nakir, will come and torment me in the grave. *You* can take whatever nonsense I say, but they would pick up their maces and start their drubbing right on, dana dan."

Raushan's lips formed into a smile and she looked away. Pandey's tongue continued wagging.

"And I'm not even Kabir so that when I die in place of my body, flowers will appear, which the two of you might divide among yourselves, half you and the other half my first queen."

Raushan scowled at Pandey. The narrow line of the smile had disappeared. He laughed again. "OK, Raushan, tell me one other thing. Why do miracles always happen to people in the past, people we haven't seen or known? Why don't they happen to us? Today? Now? By the way, there is one good thing in all this. I will earn double credit after dying. There will of course be pind-daan; and in addition to that, you'll also recite the faatiha over me, as you did for your mother and for Uncle Rajab Ali."

Raushan banged the plate down, "Don't talk such gloomy nonsense with food in front of you."

"Raushan, I'm much older than you, so it's almost certain that I'll go first. I added 'almost' just in case you get tired of me and think of ending your life. But you wouldn't do that, would you? You wouldn't go away leaving me alone." He grabbed a handful of her thick tresses and tugged. "Tell me truthfully: what will you do if I die before you? Tell me."

"What *can* I do?" Raushan pushed away the sudden gush of tears. "I'd be resigned to the will of God, as I'm resigned now."

“Resigned to His will”, Pandey repeated the words separately and forcefully. “Wherever Ram keeps me; that’s where I’ll stay. The Hindus say Ram is the same, the same Elevated Being to whom we attribute everything and become free of our responsibilities, the one who enables us to bear our miseries with patience. This is not Rama, the son of Dasaratha. This is the Brahma of the Vedas. Kabir had the same Ram, so did Gandhi. No matter what religion we adopt, what label we attach, we’ll remain the same and perform our duties as humans.”

He suddenly became quiet. Then, as if he had remembered something, he added, “I bequeathed half of my property to you and the boys, and the other half to the daughters. I’ve given the house where I live to my wife.”

“Pundit, I don’t need anything. It’s enough that you have arranged for us to live here in Rasoolpur. Both boys are well educated. They’ll earn enough by themselves. You’ve given them the greatest wealth they can have. You got them out of here and had them educated in the best schools and colleges. You looked after them very well. What more can you possibly give us now? My head seems ready to burst when I think that man is basically so mean and selfish. And I too have committed a selfish act: I’ve taken a poor woman’s husband from her.”

“That woman isn’t as poor as you might think, Raushan Begum. I’ve always been there for her, and I’ve been there completely. Society has given her much more than I could ever give you. It’s terribly lonely living all by yourself cut off from your people. So, if you ask me honestly, I’ve actually sinned more against you than her. I wouldn’t like to add to it by dying and leaving you helpless. My heartfelt wish really is that when I die, I am with you.”

Raushan put her soft palm on Pandey’s mouth.

If K.K. Mama were alive he would have said, “He always had a black tongue. Whatever evil he uttered came to pass.” But K.K. had passed away a long time ago. Those stories of his,

those memorable gatherings, were a thing of the past. God's name alone abides – God who has no beginning or end, Who is invisible beyond comprehension, beyond life and death. (We humans only wish to be beyond death and keep forging other worlds in imagination.)

The noise at the door was getting louder by the minute. People were carrying wooden clubs in their hands, some capped with burnished blades. They were all local residents. Pandey's three sons-in-law, one of their relatives, and people from the family of Didda's older brother-in-law had all come rushing from Allahabad, but two of Didda's own sons had remained aloof from this trouble. Upon hearing the filthy abuses hurled at their mother, Raushan's two sons had opened the door and come out unarmed. Inside, in the courtyard, Raushan stood holding up the Quran in her hands with every one of her limbs trembling.

History was repeating itself again so soon. When Raushan was a young girl, a contest between wrestlers had suddenly acquired communal overtones. Shopkeepers had quickly dropped their shutters. The noise of running feet had shaken Raushan's street. At that time, Raushan's grandmother, hoisting the Quran in her hands in the same way, had come and stood in the courtyard reciting it loudly. And the maid had covered her head with her mantle and raised her hands to pray: "O Master Ali! Remove this hardship from our lives."

(At the time of his martyrdom, Hazrat Othman was reciting the Quran. His blood had spattered on the Word of God and made it colorful.) What had to happen, happened. Raushan's grandfather, who had gone to the village to have the harvest brought home and was on his way back, was murdered along the way. Nothing happened in the city itself.

A distraught Raushan came straight out of the house and stood in front of her boys, shielding them.

“These are your own relatives, Jaanki Raman Pandey’s children”, she screamed loudly.

“Let’s start with the slut. Kill her”, someone shouted back from the crowd.

“Please bring the necessary papers and sit with us peacefully. We are willing to relinquish the property that the Pundit had given over to us.” Raushan remembered well the argument that had started at Didda’s elder brother-in-law’s house. What had been a squabble over eating or not eating meat had ultimately led to the division of ancestral property. Pushing the boys behind her, she uttered those few sentences very loudly.

With a premonition that something awful might happen, Onkaar Nath Mishra, over seventy now and practically a recluse after his wife’s death, rushed to the scene in his jeep just in time. Having lived through the world’s ups and downs, and being well aware of people’s ways and dispositions, the thought of the world’s impermanence had become etched on his heart. He had heard that Pandey’s three sons-in-law had already left for Rasoolpur with the armies of their cronies in tow, all because Pandey had died there. It was confirmed that the proper funeral prayer had been performed for Pandey and he was then interred in the Muslim cemetery there. Onkaar Nath also had some perfunctory knowledge that Pandey had bequeathed half of his property to Raushan and the boys before his death. And rumor had it that because of the national elections just around the corner, ISI agents activities had moved into high gear in the Rasoolpur area. Considering all that, the situation didn’t look at all promising. Holding on to his back with his hands, he got up.

Pandey’s first wife pulled her mantle over her forehead and came to him. “Brother” she said, “don’t let the boys and their mother come to any harm. Raushan Aara never snatched him away from me, and the boys of course are his own flesh and

blood. A change of faith does not change the relationship.” Her voice became hoarse. “I couldn’t stop the sons-in-law.”

Even Onkaar Nath felt his eyes becoming moist. It was the first time he had felt like crying since his wife’s death. He stood up. After a short pause he said, “Pray to Bhagwan that nothing untoward happens before I get there.”

His deceased wife was devoted to her brother. It was because of that connection that he had accepted Raushan and the boys, but his own children were siding with Jaanki Raman’s sons-in-law. True, they hadn’t accompanied them, but they hadn’t said anything either. And Onkaar Nath’s nephews had even gone along with the crowd. They had suddenly remembered the kinship that existed between their two families.

The prayers of Jaanki Raman’s dark, gold-hearted wife were answered. Onkaar Nath reached there in the nick of time, otherwise who knows what might have happened. Everything was settled peacefully. Raushan agreed to give up her share of the estate and property – with this promise, and upon some other conditions, the crowd returned home with Pandey’s exhumed body.

This was Onkaar Nath’s first encounter with Raushan. “Chhoti Bahu, please give them your permission” he had said very gently. “There are only three of you here, but there are many innocents in the village who might lose their lives even though they have nothing to do with this dispute. The atmosphere is not good. Tell them yourself: fine, take it. There’s grace in that. And beside, it will preserve the good will. We cannot fight with them all.”

Such disrespect for the Pundit’s body! Raushan almost fell over, overcome by the shame. How much had she begged her village folk and her own sons to have his body taken to his house in Allahabad? But no one had listened to her.

“Chhoti Bahu, a dead body is never left to rot, neither at home, nor on the road. Everyone knows that.”

After the body was taken away, Onkaar Nath stayed there for some time. “Whether you cremate him or bury him, what does it matter?” he said. “He is gone from this world. The five elements have returned to the five elements: earth to earth, sky to sky, fire to fire, water to water, and air to air. The same process occurs in either case, it just takes longer if the body is interred, but people don’t understand it. The rituals observed after death are all for the solace of the living. I’m an ordinary person; I’m not in a position to say much, but the thinkers and philosophers have called the body clothing for the soul which it keeps changing. The soul itself does not decay. It is immortal. If we accept that, daughter, exhumation of a body already interred makes no sense, but what can I do? Seems Bhagwan has a special love for the ignorant. For they abound in His kingdom. Practice patience.”

“Brother Onkaar Sahib,” Raushan lifted her tear-filled eyes and looked at him, “The earth stands firm only because there are pious people like you around. Please do me this small favor: take us to Allahabad. Find me a place anywhere there. I have some relatives in Allahabad, though they have all severed contact with me. Grandfather Rajab Ali died a long time ago. Now even grandmother is gone.”

She again began crying inconsolably.

A funeral pyre burning away at the edge of the Ganges, lapped by its gentle waters. Orange flames leaping in the murky darkness. A few stray, spotty clouds sail through the sky. The raucous sound of crickets hiding in the vegetation. The people are all gone. An awesome, eerie silence – eternal, unending, unaffected by the crackling fire, the noise of the frogs and crickets, or the waves-pervades the landscape. There are several other funeral pyres as well, devouring human bodies. Five elements returning to five elements.

River, O river! How many have you seen ablaze? On this edge and on the other? From here to there, where you begin and where you end?

Emerging from behind a clump of trees, she comes forward. The land is a little elevated on one side, hiding a row of eternal, lush green trees. She stands on this elevated ground – a fair woman, tall and slight (and at this time as blanché as white paper). The edge of her fine, white, lace-bordered sari flutters in the wind. She seems to have suddenly overpowered the whole scene.

This man who was offered up to the flames, whose abundant, gorgeous hair was consumed by the blaze in an instant, whose skull, sturdy despite his age, was cracked open with the ritual blow of the cudgel – what was this man to her? Why had she come to the cremation ground where women are not permitted? Who was she? And these people who, forgetting the maggots in the grave and the flames of the pyre, were ready to kill and be killed – who were they?

“Don’t let anything deceive you, Raushan Aara Begum! This concept of the other world ... it is nothing more than a childish fantasy to live forever. Our togetherness will last only as long as we live. And so far as the next world is concerned, well, if it pleases you, say the faatiha for me as well.” Then he had laughed mischievously, “But would your faatiha reach me, since I am ...”

Uneasiness, like the smoke from the waning pyre, swirled inside Raushan’s whole being.

“All the heavens, all the hells, we go through them in this world itself. They’re all creations of our own making, the consequences of our own actions.”

“Oh, you talk so much nonsense, Pundit. Be quiet now.” Raushan Aara wiped away her tears with her little finger.

“One of the mantras recited at pind-daan says: go and never ever return to this world. I too would like to recite it. ‘Jaanki

Raman Pandey', you go now. And don't you come back. The world isn't ready for you, not just yet."

Raushan Aara wrapped the fluttering hem of her sari tightly around her frail shoulders and, her heart heavy, started slowly retreating backward – forty steps.

—*Translated by Faruq Hassan and
Muhammad Umar Memon*





Fundamental duties

It shall be the duty of every citizen of India -

- (a)** to abide by the Constitution and respect its ideals and institutions, the National Flag and the National Anthem;
- (b)** to cherish and follow the noble ideals which inspired our national struggle for freedom;
- (c)** to uphold and protect the sovereignty, unity and integrity of India;
- (d)** to defend the country and render national service when called upon to do so;
- (e)** to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India transcending religious, linguistic and regional or sectional diversities; to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women;
- (f)** to value and preserve the rich heritage of our composite culture;
- (g)** to protect and improve the natural environment including forests, lakes, rivers and wild life, and to have compassion for living creatures;
- (h)** to develop the scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform;
- (i)** to safeguard public property and to abjure violence;
- (j)** to strive towards excellence in all spheres of individual and collective activity so that the nation constantly rises to higher levels of endeavour and achievement;
- (k)** who is a parent or guardian to provide opportunities for education to his child or, as the case may be, ward between the age of six and fourteen years.

BAKSA and other short stories

The short stories in this collection span a wide array of topics that ensnare the urban landscape as well as the rural countryside of India, while telling the tales about the conflicts of the rich and the poor alike. The characters, along with their lives and happenings, delve and uncover issues of communalism, sectarianism and religion among other topics. This collection of fascinating short stories, translated from the original Urdu by the author and other translators, shows a mirror to Indian society and provides a socio-psychological insight into the human psyche.

ZAKIA MASHHADI (b. 1944) is an Urdu fiction writer, as well as translator, who has now been writing for over 40 years. She has to her credit seven collections of short stories, three novels and 16 translations of fiction, as well as academic books, in Hindi, Urdu and English. Currently she is working on an Urdu translation of Tamil short stories and also on a new collection of her own stories. It can be said that no anthology of contemporary Urdu literature is complete without a story of hers. Her stellar works have brought her literary acclaim. Recently she has been awarded the highly prestigious “Iqbal Samman” by the Ministry of Arts and Culture, Government of Madhya Pradesh. She has also been bestowed with awards like Sahitya Academy Award for Translation from English into Urdu and Mirza Ghalib Award for Literature, to name just a few.



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